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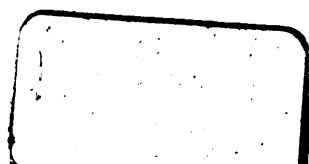
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VIGNETTES

STORIES

By

"RITA"

Author of

"Sheba," "Joan & Mrs. Carr," Etc., Etc

IN ONE VOLUME

LONDON

F. V. WHITE & CO

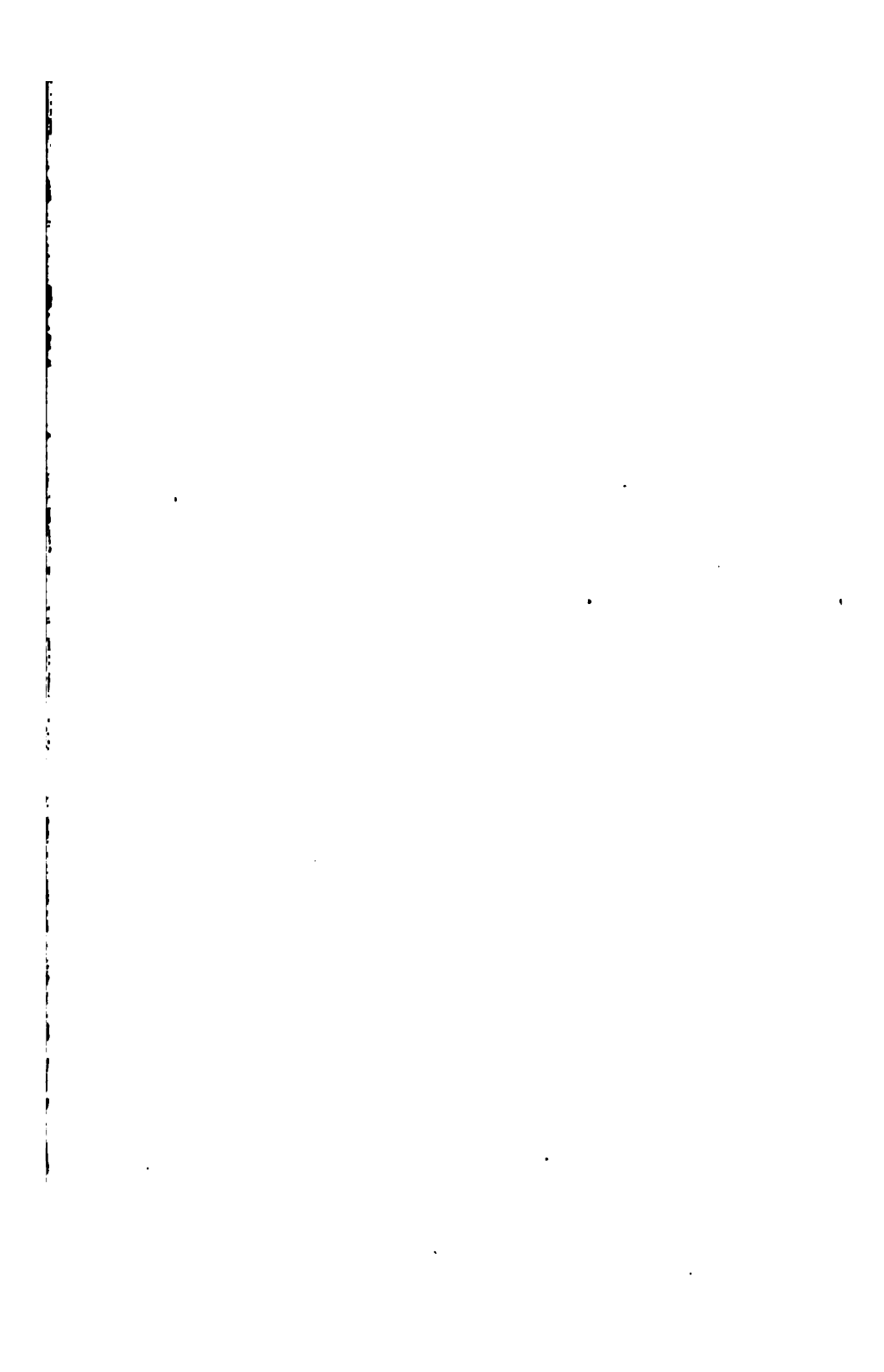
14 BEDFORD STREET, STRAND, W.C

1896

PRINTED BY
KELLY AND CO. LIMITED, 182, 183 AND 184, HIGH HOLBORN, W.C.,
AND KINGSTON-ON-THAMES.

CONTENTS.

	PAGE
SNOW-WHITE	I
IN THE VAULTS	47
THE SPECTRE	71
"CONSEQUENCES"	89
HAUNTED	125
THE IRONY OF FATE	167
"GOOD-BYE"	227
"CHILD LILIAN"	253
A KNOT IN A HANDKERCHIEF	295



VIGNETTES
STORIES.

Snow-White.

CHAPTER I.

HOW SNOW-WHITE WAS FOUND AND LOST.

How cold it was ! How terribly, bitterly cold !

The snow and the sleet blew in sharp gusts round the street corners ; the sky was dark and cloudy ; the wind cut keen as a knife, and found out with malicious cunning every broken window-pane in the wretched houses of the crowded city, every bare and dilapidated attic, every shivering form scantily clothed and worse fed, that made its miserable unit among miserable millions. How cold it was this bitter winter night !

Too cold surely for anyone to be out, unless compelled by humanity's slave driver—necessity. Too cold surely for a child to be wandering friendless and alone through the sloppy, half-frozen streets ; though it might have been only the ghost of a child, so slight, and fragile, and shadowy a thing it seemed, white from head to feet, with a covering of the winter sky's providing ; a little, ice-cold, ghostly thing that flitted out from a circle of light, and gazed with frightened eyes at the hurrying figures that went in and out of those swinging doors.

She did not know what the place was. It was brilliantly illuminated. It had windows of glittering glass, rainbow-hued and dazzling ; it was the one thing of light, and glow, and warmth, amidst the gloom, and the falling snow, and the bitter, biting sleet ; and as the little creature paused and looked longingly at its beauty, two figures came out, and brushed roughly against her—a man and a woman. The woman muttered a coarse oath, and hurried on with reeling and uncertain steps. The man paused, and looked at her with sombre eyes, that held their own bitter history of the sorrows and tragedies of life.

He saw she was alone—alone in the London streets in the bleak and stormy night.

Heaven knows he had had enough to harden his heart ; to steel his compassion ; to make him callous of misery, and poverty, and shame, and desolation that are bywords to the poor ; and yet——

He could not have told what stayed his steps, what sent that involuntary thrill of pity to his already over-burdened heart ; but, all the same, he stopped a moment and looked down at the little outcast, with the snow lying loose on her fair hair and miserable clothing, and framing in the pale, clear outlines of a face as colourless as itself.

“Have you lost your way ?” he asked, a little roughly.

She looked up—a calm, direct look—and stepped back into the shadow.

“Do you hear ?” he said again. “What are you doing alone at such an hour—on such a night ?”

For all answer, she took a little piece of folded paper from her ragged frock, and handed it to him. There was a name and an address written upon it, and he read them under the light of the glaring lamps—read them, and looked at her as if stupefied.

“Good Heavens !” he muttered below his breath, and again he looked at the words. “Do you wish to go—there ?” he asked the child.

She nodded.

“*Oui, monsieur,*” she said softly.

“You are French ?” he said with that assertion of a self-evident fact which is as foolish as it seems natural. “Have you no mother or father ?”

She shook her head ; the white flakes were resting in a thick shower upon it by this time. She looked like a little image of snow.

“I must go there,” she said in quaint broken English ; “*maman m’a dit ; monsieur will tell—où est la rue ?*”

But monsieur seemed to have lost sight and hearing. He stood there in a sort of stupor. Memory was busy with his brain, showing him a kaleidoscopic change of scenes and pictures that swept all sense and thought of the present moments into a haze.

“My God !” he muttered again ; “how the years have gone ! *His* name again, and to reach me thus.”

The child stood quite still ; she was used to being

patient. Her young years had been an apprenticeship to such privations and sorrows as leave no space for joy, or hope, or impatience. One dull routine of hardship and labour, brightened by little love or tenderness, was all she had known.

The voice of the stranger arrested her attention. She was dimly wondering whether the great glittering pile before her was the abode of some great and rich person—a palace of luxury and beauty set amidst the sombre background of storm, and sleet, and dreariness, that were all around.

"You do not know this place," he said in her own tongue, "but you wish to go there?"

"*Mais oui, monsieur*," she said simply.

"I will show you—I mean I will take you," he said with a sort of effort that she was not quick enough to detect. "It will be no use," he added under his breath; "no use. The years could not have changed him, save to make him harder, crueller, and more selfish. Still, we will go."

He held out his hand, and she put her small cold fingers into it; so small they were, and so cold, that he almost fancied a snow-flake had fluttered into his own warm palm, and looked down to make sure she was beside him.

"Poor little child!" he said softly; "poor little Snow-white!"

For one of the pictures memory had conjured up for him, was the picture of a large dim room, lighted only by a fire in the dusk of a winter twilight; and seated by the fire was a small, fairy-like figure, with an open picture-book on its knee. He could see the picture—the very blots that stained the white margin, the little finger that pointed to it, the earnest eyes upturned to a boyish face, the red lips, the loose fair hair. He passed his hand rapidly across his own eyes as if to brush away these cobwebs of fancy. Only they were not fancy, but the realities of a past long out-lived, and almost, he had thought, forgotten.

"If it should be," he muttered, as he hurried on. The child's little feet broke into a trot, to keep pace with his rapid steps. She was footsore, and spent, and weak with long fasting, but she uttered no complaint. Presently he remembered her, and slackened his speed, with a remorseful look at her down-bent head.

"You poor little mortal!" he said; I had almost for-

gotten you." Then, without further prelude, he lifted her up into his arms, and wrapped his own cloak round her. It was thin, and old, and very threadbare, but it kept the snow and sleet off her little shivering frame, and the sense of warmth and rest was so novel to her and so delightful, that she could find no words to express it.

Thus they went on, with the lights and sounds of the half-deserted city all about them, in the desolate winter night.

He stopped at last. The street was a gloomy one even in the sunshine of a summer's day, but how much more gloomy at such a time as this! The houses were tall and dark, and fronted an open space that showed a high breast-work of brick-wall and rotting hoardings; a space advertised to be let for building purposes, but whose desolate and forbidding aspect had not yet aroused a spirit of enterprise in the mind of any builder.

The wind seemed colder and keener here than in the neighbouring thoroughfares. The sky wore a darker frown; the very sleet seemed to carry an added sting of bitterness in its fall.

The man stopped, breathless with his rapid walk, and looked around.

"This is the place," he said to the child, and set her down on the sloppy, half-frozen pavement; "and that," pointing vaguely to the row of dark, frowning houses—"that is the house."

She still held his hand, and followed the gesture with her eyes.

"Come with me," she said, with a pathetic entreaty that moved him deeply. "It looks so dark—I am afraid."

He laughed a short, dreary laugh.

"Come there," he said. "It would be odd. Ten years ago I was kicked out of that door—theoretically. I vowed I would never enter it again of my own free will."

She looked up. She had not half understood his muttered speech. Her hand drew him gently on towards the door.

"It is No. 6," she said in her own tongue. "I know. It is my own age. So I remember."

"Your own age?" he echoed. "It was her age when I came first to this house. I was an orphan, too—a fatherless, motherless boy, left to the mercy of the world—or

the charity of one man. And twenty years have come and gone since then ; twenty years—great Heaven ! ”

It was almost a sob that escaped him, though his eyes were dry and his lips set firm in rigid pallor. A sob, not for himself so much as for the desolate boy he remembered in the first decade of those years, so loveless, so friendless, so utterly alone, that it seemed as if the whole wide earth could have held no sadder, or more dreary lot than his. She had not caught the muttered words, nor did it seem it any way strange that an unknown wayfarer should be here by her side, or that her faith and trust should have gone out to him so perfectly and simply as they had done.

Childhood accepts without reasoning. Hence, perhaps, its greater capacity for enjoyment. It is experience that sows distrust and teaches caution, rubbing the bloom off those purer and sweeter emotions which have never known the check of worldly wisdom.

The man and the child stood side-by-side on the wide doorstep, where the drifted snow lay in a frozen mass. All about them was dark and dreary. The street-lamp burnt low, and the flickering flame was swept into strange shapes by the fierce wind.

The child shivered, and crept closer to her companion.

“Why do you not knock ? ” she said.

She was weary and half-frozen, and the house promised warmth and shelter from the bitter night. Her mother had said she would find a friend there, and she believed it.

“Please knock,” she went on plaintively. “I am so cold and so hungry. If I had not lost my way I should have been here hours ago.”

He roused himself with an effort ; his hand went up to the knocker and seized it resolutely. As he did so, a rush of noise seemed to fill the earth and sky. From every belfry and steeple broke out the clanging clamour of a thousand bells, that shook the night with sound.

The child gave a low cry of fear.

“What is it ? ” she asked, trembling and clinging to his side. “What has happened ? ”

He stared at her in dazed and stupefied silence. His brain seemed bewildered. The weight of memories charged it with the pain and sorrow, the passion and regret, of a whole long lifetime.

“The same night,” he muttered, and his hand dropped.

The knocker roused no echo in the silent house, but the streets seemed alive with the glad music of the ringing bells. "It is Christmas Eve," he said to the child. "That is why they ring. Christmas Eve! And I am twenty years older than when I first stood here and heard their message.

"The Eve of Noël," she whispered, and folded her hands, and looked up at the starless sky with rapt and solemn eyes. "That is the night the angels sing, only it is so far away one cannot always hear them. But to-night, perhaps——"

"To-night," he interrupted with a bitterness that swept all softer memories from his heart. "To-night they will not sing for us—not here, at least. This—Heaven knows! —is no place for angels."

And his brow grew dark, as he remembered the sins and sorrows, the fierce passions and evil deeds, that surely hovered on brooding wings of lost and fallen spirits over this spot of earth and this house of darkness.

Then once again he lifted his hand, and this time the grim old iron gave eloquent tongue to the hushed and sleeping household, seeming to carry a fierce summons through the dark and gloomy hall, and wake a million echoes in the desolate rooms so long untrodden and unseen.

He stepped aside into the shadow of the porch, and pushed the child gently forward.

"If they take you in," he said, "you will not need me more. If they refuse——"

He did not finish his sentence. There came a sound of bolts and chains, the key turned with a harsh and grating sound. Out of the darkness a face peered, and a voice demanded the business of the intruder. The child stepped forward, covered with the loose snow-flakes, white with fear, yet strong with courage to do what her mother's voice had bidden.

"I have brought a letter for M. Thornicroft," she said in her quaint English. "I must myself give it to him. I am to say I am Marguerite Delapierre."

A moment's silence. The listener drew his breath sharply as if he feared to break its spell.

What would be the answer to that appeal? A curse—a blow—a mandate to begone—to tread again the desolate

streets in her forlorn helplessness, a waif and stray among the numberless waifs and strays on life's great ocean.

A moment's silence. Then the door shut with a loud and sullen sound. Involuntarily he stepped forward, his hand outstretched, a smothered oath upon his lips. But something arrested him, paralysed both word and action, and he stood bewildered and incredulous gazing at an empty space—a closed door. The child was there no longer.

CHAPTER II.

HOW SNOW-WHITE RETURNED TO THE BEAR.

"ONCE upon a time there lived in a lonely cottage, surrounded by a garden, a poor widow. In the garden grew two rose-trees, one of which bore white roses, the other red. Now the widow had two daughters, who so much resembled the rose-bushes that she gave to one the name of 'Snow-white,' and to the other 'Rose-red.'"

The reader paused. The book lay open on his knee as he sat by the fire, and his eyes turned from the picture of the little maiden in the fairy-tale to the dull glow of the coals in the small, rusty grate.

It was a poor room, and very poorly furnished. The outside gloom seemed to have once found its way in, and then made up its mind never to change its quarters. The window was small and grimed with dust and soot, the furniture faded and broken; a table in the window was littered over with papers and books; a small rough shelf above the chimney-piece held another array of volumes; and in the one old rickety leather chair sat the occupant of this dismal tenement, "keeping Christmas" in a dismal fashion, by stress of that poverty and friendlessness that were his sole portion of this world's goods.

His thoughts were far away now—the fairy-tale had borne him back on its fanciful wings to days far off, and full of sweet and bitter memories. It revived a long procession of incidents that marched by now like the figures in a panorama, one following the other in quick succession.

He let the book fall to the floor at last, and groaned aloud as he bent his head on his clasped hands.

"My little sweetheart—my pretty Snow-white!" he muttered. "What fate has been yours? Worse than my own, perhaps. Dead—dead in a foreign land, and so

poor and so friendless there, that you must needs trust your child to the tender mercies of the tyrant who cursed your own young life."

Then he sprang to his feet impatiently.

"Why did I let her go?" he said aloud. "I could have kept her with me, had I but said I was her mother's friend. It was sending the dove to the nest of the eagle, the lamb to the lion's den—and yet he took her in!"

His restless pacing had brought him to the window now. He stopped and looked out. The snow lay thick upon the roofs and sills, and piled upon the pavements. A great stillness was everywhere. The grey sky looked dismal in its colourless expanse, and the wind sighed mournfully through the deserted street.

Here no Christmas festivities found space or echo. All was cheerless, dreary, poverty-stricken. It was that worst kind of poverty, too—the struggle for respectability, the ceaseless endeavour to keep heads above water in the ever-deepening stream of difficulty and necessity; the war with increasing needs that meant increasing debts; the shifts and struggles, the sordid cares, and petty slights and humiliations, that wear like the dropping of water, and depress like the weight of lead.

Dick Thornicroft knew all the stages and gradations of such poverty as this. Poet, author, and dramatist, a ten years' struggle which had taxed brain and heart and imagination to their utmost, had still kept him stranded on the shores of unpopularity, and now weighted each new effort with secret despair.

What was Christmas to him, save a time for duns to be more importunate, landladies more imperative, the brain-market more crammed with flash, sensational commodities, work harder to get and worse paid, loneliness a more melancholy companion, and hope a less constant friend? That was all—and he stood there in the dusk of this Christmas Day, heavy-hearted and heavy-eyed, thinking only: "Oh life—life, eternal mystery and eternal woe, would to Heaven thy weary days were over, and thy weary struggle at an end!"

He turned from the window at last, and went back to his chair. The book lay face upwards as he had dropped it. He stooped and picked it up, and looked sadly and regretfully at the picture.

"It was so like her," he said ; "my pretty white rose, plucked by another hand, trampled in the mire and mud of the world's great highway. Poor lost, unhappy child ! cursed from your very birth, nurtured in avarice and gloom, cast out in your helplessness and need, and now—dead !"

He leant his head back on the frayed, hard cushion of the chair, and closed his eyes, and once more gave himself up to retrospection. The dusk deepened, the fire burnt dull and fitfully, the dreary room was very still. It seemed to him that the gloom and the stillness lulled him into a sort of semi-dream, a dream in which the pretty fairy-tale wove itself into the dull, drear fabric of reality ; that once again a lovely face smiled at him, and the music of a remembered voice chimed softly on his ear ; that the fairy figure of his child-love stood by his side, and laid cool fingers on his aching brow, and smoothed the furrows out with tender touch, and whispered of happy days to come. He slept on ; he did not want to wake. It was only in sleep that peace ever came to him, that the tired brain relaxed its fevered energies, and the sad heart grew restful or at ease.

The dusk grew deeper ; strange shadows flitted to and fro ; and the fire, weary of its dull suppression, burst out in sudden flame. Perhaps the glad light coloured his dream, for suddenly he smiled, and his lips murmured a name, and, as he murmured it, it seemed to him that a touch, light and cold as snow, fell on his hand, and, as he clasped it, melted into warmth and substance. Holding it still close and safe, the one kindly thing among the gloom and darkness of his life, he awoke.

He awoke. But he was not alone, or else his dream had taken form and substance, and embodied itself into this small, light shape which stood so patiently beside him.

"Great Heavens !" he cried, and stared with wide-open, incredulous eyes at the little trembling figure. "You ! How did you come here ?"

Large tears gathered in the eyes that met his own.

"Please do not be angry," she said piteously. "I could not stay with him. He is so cruel ; and the old woman—she said she hated my mother, and would hate me too. And you were so kind, and all night I thought of you. I saw you there—in a picture it was. And I asked the old woman where you lived, and she told me. And I slipped

out of that dreadful house. They did not know. I do not think they would have cared. I went to your house. They said you had left long ago. A little lame boy heard me ask. He said you lived here now—that you had been very kind to him. He showed me the way, and I was glad. The streets were empty and so cold. The woman said the top door was yours. I knocked, but you did not hear. I came in, and you were asleep. So I waited."

He still looked and listened in bewildered fashion. The small, fair face, the drooping hair, the large, dark-lashed eyes—how familiar they seemed, and how sweet!

"May I stay?" she asked. "You have the same name, but you are not like him. He was cruel to my mother. I am afraid of him!"

"Stay here?" he echoed.

He looked from her to his miserable surroundings. Yet, even in that moment, it was of the unfitness of the place for her that he thought—not of any possible cost or sacrifice that her presence might entail upon himself.

"Would you like to stay here?" he asked, doubtfully. "You do not know me. I too may be wicked and cruel."

She smiled—the smile of perfect trust and innocence, that one never sees save on a young child's lips.

"You are good," she said simply. "I know that. And I will help you. I can do many things. I will be your child. Do not send me away!"

"Heaven forbid!" he said fervently. "Who knows, after all, you may be a Christmas gift from Heaven. My dear, I am a poor man, and I have to toil hard and live frugally; but all that is mine you are welcome to share, if only for your mother's sake."

"You knew her?" she asked quickly.

He stroked back the fair hair from the solemn childish brow.

"I knew her—yes," he said huskily, "when she was just such a child as you. I was a child also, and we loved each other as—children do. And then we were parted, and I saw her no more; but I never forgot her, and for her sake I will be your friend till death."

Oh, solemn, knightly vow of a knightly heart, how were you to be kept, and at what a cost!

"And now," said the new friend, after a long and solemn

pause, "now that your future's settled, let us see what's to be done with you. Are you hungry?"

"Yes, sir."

"Oh, you must not call me 'sir'; that will never do. It's true I'm to be your guardian, and protector, and all that, but we won't be too formal. Suppose you call me Dick? Can you say it? No, not D-e-e-k. Dick—sharp, sound, English Dick. That was what your mother called me. I must get you out of your foreign ways, Snow-white. That's my name for you. Do you like it?"

"Yes," she said, smiling! "but my name is Marguerite."

"Very well," said the self-appointed guardian; "let it remain so, but I will call you the other, and some day, when you can read, you shall read the story for yourself. It was your mother's favourite tale," he added with a sigh. "But now let me see what is in the larder," he went on briskly. "I fear it is sadly empty like that of the famous Mother Hubbard. Phew-w!" with a long whistle; "it has not even a bone! What shall we do, Snow-white?"

"Oh, please, I am not very hungry," said the child; "and I am too happy to care about dinner," she added, looking up at him with brimming eyes.

His own grew grave.

"Nevertheless," he said, "we must have dinner of some sort. It is Christmas Day, you know, and everyone is feasting on roast beef and plum-pudding. I wonder, now, if Mrs. Crustace could be induced to favour us with something. Perhaps the festive season may have softened her heart. Let us see."

He rang the bell forthwith. The child had listened wonderingly to his words, not half comprehending them, and she looked amazed at the stout, panting, red-faced figure which presently appeared in the doorway.

"You rang, sir?" remarked the owner of the figure with an interrogative snort which was not very prepossessing.

"I did, Mrs. Crustace," said the young man affably. "The truth is that I—I have stupidly forgotten to order in anything in the shape of food, and—and this is a young relative of mine come to spend Christmas with me. Now would you, like a good creature, send up something—say, some ham and eggs and tea, or some such little trifle for her benefit? She is very hungry, poor little mortal! I'm

sure you can see that, and your motherly heart will respond without further entreaty from me."

"None of your gammon, if you please, Mr. Thornicroft!" said Mrs. Crustace loftily, "which, well I know, is good enough for books and play-actings, but don't go down here. Who's to pay, that's what I want to know, and a month's rent behind already, and vittals to order? No dinner—I should think not indeed! And I'm to provide for two now, am I? Your relation from the country doesn't look as if she was overburdened with the ready—she don't. And as for you, sir, though I don't deny as you're a gentleman, still, lodgings is lodgings, and I can't pay my rent out o' you—that's certain. Give me something on account, and I'll not be so hard as to refuse sendin' you up a bit of dinner. The child looks as if she needed it, sure enough, but I can't afford to be out of pocket no more, Mr. Thornicroft, and that's the truth."

"My dear Mrs. Crustace, you know as well as I do that I can't get my money till the office opens, and that won't be till after Boxing Day. I promise faithfully——"

"It won't do, Mr. Thornicroft—it won't do. Promises don't pay my rent, nor taxes, nor find Crustace in beer and 'baccy, leave alone the children as wears and tears clothes enough to set up a rag-shop. Come, I don't want to be hard, bein' Christmas-time and all, but summat I must have, and that's the long and short of it. Say a sovereign now, and you shall have as nice a bit of beef, and puddin' to follow, as ever you tasted in your life—that I'll swear!"

"A sovereign!" Dick Thornicroft looked from floor to ceiling as if seeking a likely spot to find such a treasure. "My dear woman," he gasped faintly, "I haven't the half, or the quarter of such a coin, I assure you. If I had, it should be yours without the asking. Ah," as a brilliant thought struck him, "I have it! What do you say to admission to the theatre on Boxing Night, Mrs. Crustace—you and your husband, and all your interesting family? There, I can promise you that safe enough, for"—woefully—"it's my own pantomime—the first thing I've ever had accepted, but that's a detail. Will that do for you, most obliging of landladies?"

"Well," said Mrs. Crustace dubiously, "as for orders. I don't hold with them as as a rule. Make it a box, now."

"A box it shall be," agreed the young man readily. "The stage-box—the best in the house. You can see all the fairies—and all the paint for the matter of that—at their very best, scene shifters and setters thrown in gratis. Is it a bargain?"

"I suppose a box is worth a sovereign?" said Mrs. Crustace, still doubtful of her bargain.

"Two, three, and five guineas, *vide* daily press," said the young man with alacrity.

"Very well, then. I'll not be hard on you this time," answered Mrs. Crustace, qualifying her submission by that hint as to "future" times in store for her impecunious tenant. "I'll send you up a bit of dinner, and for the matter o' that, I know it'll be breakfast, too. You ain't got anything in that cupboard o' yours—not so much as an ounce o' tea, that I knows. And so good-evening. And don't you forget that box."

"Not for worlds, my dear madam," cried Dick joyfully, as he saw the last flutter of her ample skirts, and congratulated himself on his victory. He almost laughed as he looked at the child's puzzled face. "That was well done," he said with a merry ring in his voice long a stranger to it. "Come, child, put off that grave look. We will eat, and drink, and be joyful. Why, I can't count the years since I had company on Christmas Day. I must make the most of the honour. Why, what are you going to do?"

"I am going to lay the cloth," she said with a staid and formal gravity that amused him immensely. "I always did that for mamma—when we were not too poor," she added softly.

The admission sobered Dick Thornicroft's unwonted spirits. "And she too, was poor," he sighed, and took his old place by the fire, and watched the little figure flitting to and fro, with painful intentness.

"Tell me about your life—about her," he added, shading his eyes with his hands as he bent towards the now glowing flames.

The child had deftly and quietly cleared the table of its pile of papers and books, and brought it into the middle of the room. He thought, watching her, that the apprenticeship of her young years must have been a hard one, ere she could have learnt to put her baby hands to such homely and useful services.

"We lived in a great city," she said, commencing her narrative in her own direct fashion as she spread the cloth upon the little square table. "It was very beautiful; maman and I used to walk through it on fête nights. Maman had not often much time to walk. She worked very hard. She used to make flowers for the *modistes*. I do not think they paid her much. We had so little to eat or drink, and but one small room."

"And your father?" asked the young man huskily. "Where was he?"

"I do not know," said the child simply; "maman said he had left us. And one day there were terrible doings in the city. Fire, and shot, and armed men, and cruel faces; And they brought him home to us. He was dead! Then maman did nothing but weep. She had no work. The shops were all shut. There were soldiers everywhere. It was cold and dreary, and we had no food often and often. She grew weaker and weaker. At times she could not bear to see me; at other times she would weep over me, and call me her only comfort. Then one night she pinned that paper in my frock, and put some money in my hand, and said I was to go over the sea to a friend who would take care of me. But I cried, and I would not go. The next morning they said she, too, had gone to *le bon Dieu*. I was all alone. I saw her, but I did not know her, she looked so white and so strange. Then a woman came and said I must go with her to England; that it was maman's command. I did not know—but I had that paper, and she brought me here. She took the money; she said it was for my passage. When we came to this big town she said I must find the place myself. The big *gendarmes* would tell me. I know some English; mamma had taught me. I think I walked about the whole day. I was afraid to ask the *gendarmes*, they spoke so roughly to the little children in the streets. Then I met you."

She came up to him as she finished her simple story, and laid her hand on his arm. His face was still hidden from her.

"I think," she said, "mamma would be glad that I found you; though she never said your name to me. Perhaps she forgot."

"Yes," he answered, and his voice was low, and full of hidden pain. "That was the sequel to my fairy-story, dear. She forgot."

"Why, Mr. Dick," cried the pretty voice, tremulous now with sorrow and sympathy, despite the joy that thrilled her trustful heart, since here at least she had found shelter, and friendship, and love; "why, Mr. Dick, you are crying!"

For the little hand that lay on his knee was wet with scalding tears—the tears that wring a man's heart to its depths; that bend his pride and strength to the weakness of a little child.

"Crying!" He lifted his head and tossed back the thick waves of hair, already streaked with grey, though his years but numbered twenty-eight. "Nonsense, child! I was only thinking of—of a story I heard very long ago, on another Christmas night like this."

"Tell it me," she said, and nestled closer to his side.

"It was a story of a child—of two children, I should say," he went on, his voice a little unsteady; in his eyes a look more sad than tears. "One was a girl; she had a home of luxury and wealth, but it was not a happy home; and the other child, a boy, was her playmate and companion. Her father did not like him, but perhaps that seemed of small account, for he loved the little girl so dearly that it left no room in his heart for other want or wish. The years came and went. They were often parted, for he went to a school—a hard, and evil, and hateful place—and he saw her only at long intervals. But for her I think he would not have had courage to bear his life and all its endless humiliations. He was ugly, and uncouth, and blunt of speech and manner. He made no friends; perhaps his heart was too full of that child-love to have room for any other. She, too, loved him—in a way. He was her 'bear', she used to say, the bear of that pretty fairy-tale that you shall read one day; but that bear was an enchanted prince, and—and the boy was only rough, and common, and ugly to look at, and your sex, Snow-white, like better the gay and handsome faces that smile with light and love; they do not care for the tender heart that beats beneath the bear's rough, homely coat."

"And the end?" questioned the child breathlessly, as he paused.

"The end!" he said, and his voice was more unsteady, and she could see the trembling of his lips beneath the dark moustache that shaded them. "Do you want the end?"

Well, the poor bear is a bear still, and the pretty maiden went off into the gay world with another Prince, and forgot him. That is all. And here comes the dinner! A truce to melancholy stories. We will have a happy Christmas for once—eh, my child? Why—why, Snow-white, what is this? You are crying now!”

“It was so sad,” she said softly, with a quiver in her sweet young voice that touched him more than the sight of those large, wistful tears. “Oh, poor bear! I would not have forgotten him.”

“What, not for a handsome Prince? Oh, fie, Snow-white! You are not of the right stuff for a woman!”

CHAPTER III.

HOW SNOW-WHITE WAS EDUCATED.

It was a very merry meal, that Christmas-dinner, shared by these two dissimilar beings so strangely thrown together. Mrs. Crustace was as good as her word. The roast beef was there, hot and well done, and flanked by snowy potatoes, and following it came a small plum-pudding, turned out, round and plump, from a small basin exactly the size for two people.

“A banquet for the gods,” laughed Dick Thornycroft. “It must be owing to your fairy power, Snow-white. An order never served me so well before.”

“Why do you call me that?” asked the child curiously. “Because you found me in the snow?”

“No,” he answered gravely; “it was a fancy—that’s all. After dinner I will read you the tale. It was the ground-work of my pantomime.”

“And what is a pantomime?” she asked, looking up from the rich, smoking slice of pudding on her plate to the face opposite her.

“Don’t you know?” he exclaimed in wonder. “By Jove! I will take you to see it; that’s better than telling. We’ll go together to-morrow night—shall we?”

“Yes,” she said gravely; “I will go anywhere with you.”

“I wonder,” said Dick Thornycroft, surveying her with grave attention in the intervals of eating—“I wonder, now, why you trust me?”

She only smiled. She could not tell, any more than a flower can tell why it loves air and sunlight. She only knew

that all her childish heart had gone out to him; that the rich, tender tones of his voice stirred its depths to passionate gratitude; that the very sight of his face inspired her with love and confidence.

That was all; but it was enough for her—and for him, too, for the matter of that.

"Well," he said, with that grave smile, which already she seemed to know so well, "we won't argue the question. You'll have to pick up English, little one. It's too great a strain on my intellect to talk a foreign language for more than five minutes."

"I understand you," she said simply. "Only I myself cannot say quite—quite—I mean, all the words as you do."

"You will soon learn," he answered. "I mean to educate you on entirely new principles. I wonder how they'll succeed."

He left the table now, and she put all the dishes and plates together on a tray, and took them outside; then, to his great amazement, put the table back in its place, with the books and papers neatly arranged.

"Why," he said, smiling, as he leant back and drew great whiffs from his pipe as an after-dinner luxury—"why, what a little woman it is! What a companion she will be!"

She came over, and sat down on the arm of the old leather chair.

"Oh," she said, with a full, deep-drawn sigh, "I am so happy! I may stay with you always, may I not?"

"Most assuredly you may," he answered heartily, "until you tire of me."

"What do you do?" she asked, waving that supposition aside as altogether unworthy of consideration. "I mean, what work?"

He nodded his head in the direction of the littered table.

"I write," he said laconically.

She looked a little puzzled.

"Is that—work?" she asked. "I mean, does it make money?"

"No," he said, with a short, bitter laugh, "it does not. But I am fool enough to love it for its own sake, and to put aside the question of profit."

"And you have written—what you told the woman?" she asked hesitating. "I forget the word."

"My dear child," he cried, "don't call that writing! I

feel ashamed of myself for doing it; but necessity and debt are hard taskmasters. I had no choice. It will at least keep my head above water. But, of course," looking at the little grave face, "you don't understand?"

"I think I do," she said, with that sad precocity taught by adversity and sorrow. "It means money, does it not?"

"It means want of money," he answered. "A curious fact somewhat, but the root of all evil is also the root of all good. I see plenty one can do with it—I see nothing at all one can do without it."

"Has he money—the old man where I went?" she asked in a timid, hesitating voice.

"Yes," said her new guardian; "plenty. It has been the curse of his life—and mine," he added very low.

"But is he not happy?" she questioned again.

"No, I do not think he is," answered Dick Thornicroft bitterly. "He does not deserve to be, at all events. Did you know he was your grandfather?" he asked suddenly.

She shook her head.

"No," she said; "maman did not say that."

"Well, he is—all the same. Your mother was his daughter—his only child."

"And did he love her?" asked the child eagerly.

"Was he good to her?"

"No," came solemnly and reproachfully from her new friend's lips; "and she was most unhappy. She bore it till she had grown up to womanhood. A fair, lovely, wilful girl, shut up there in a prison-house of meanness, and selfishness, and stony, cruel neglect. Then—she could bear it no longer—she left him."

"With the Prince?" asked the child eagerly, as Dick paused.

"Yes," he answered, and his lip quivered a little; "with the Prince."

"I think," she said, with a long, wistful gaze at his face—"I think she would have been happier with—you."

"God knows I would have tried to make her so!" he said.

"And now," said the child, after another long, thoughtful pause, "read me the story."

He started; then from its place on the shelf he took the

book—the old, worn, blotted, thumb-marked book, which he and his child-love had studied and read a thousand times.

It seemed to open of its own accord at the story he had promised, and the deep and tender tones of his voice seemed tenderer still as he read the simple tale. She listened, intent and quiet as himself—her small hands clasped, her large, melancholy eyes fixed upon his face.

She could have not told why the story seemed to her no woven romance of fairy-lore, but rather the sad and earnest history of a real life—a life for which, as yet, the cruel spell of malignant enchantment had not been broken. Her wistful glance took in the grey locks on that dark head bent over the book, the deep furrows on the brow, the lines around the kindly mouth.

It was a face that, rugged and ugly in its youth, yet had toned down and grown strangely attractive with advancing years—a face of power and strength, of earnest purpose and kindliness of soul; a face to be remembered, and revered, and loved when the memory of far handsomer ones might have passed away; a face that to the child's eyes seemed at once the most tender and beautiful she had ever seen.

When the tale was ended, he looked up and met her eyes. Hurriedly he set her down on the floor, and sprang to his feet.

"Oh, child—child!" he cried passionately. "Don't look so like your mother!"

She stood by the fire, silent, and half afraid, shaken by a storm of pity, and sorrow, and love.

"I am sorry," she said simply, and the tears rose to her eyes. But suddenly he remembered, and turned to her impulsively as if to reassure her over again.

"Don't cry," he said; "she has shed tears enough for both. I want to make you happy—if I can."

The deep eyes, that looked up to his own with so passionate a gratitude, might have assured him of his power to do that—might have told him, too, that here in this young heart were depths such as the mother's shallower nature had not known; that here lay clear, untroubled wells of truth, and faith, and beautiful purity; that henceforth his lonely life need never now be lonely, nor his sad heart beat so bitterly beneath its burden of a broken faith.

They might have told him all this ; perhaps they did—if not then, at least in some far future years that fate held yet in store, when this strange Christmas night should have faded away into a memory for both.

Days glided into weeks, and the child lived on with her new guardian, undisturbed and untroubled by other claims.

The success of the pantomime had enabled him to pay off his debt to Mrs. Crustace, and so re-establish himself in that estimable lady's good graces. He had also secured a tiny room for the child, and put in some neat white-wood furniture ; and she kept the little chamber as dainty and as fresh as did her namesake of the fairy-tale.

To Dick Thornicroft she was a perpetual source of wonder. Her quickness, her obedience, her skilful ways, her quaint, old-fashioned speech, the skill of her baby-fingers at work, the magic of her fairy art of arrangement and neatness, were all marvels ; and, as day by day he grew accustomed to her presence, and she to his, the plaintive, melancholy look left her face, and it grew bright and almost happy.

He taught her many odd things, and in many odd ways ; and he would talk to her as if she could understand his projects, ambitions and views of life as well as he did himself. It did her no harm. She listened with the silence of a perfect sympathy, though she puzzled her baby-brain over them when she was alone, or when he was engaged in writing.

When he went out he took her with him, and the sight of her little pale face often forced him to seek the air and exercise that he had so often denied himself. To the child it seemed that never could anyone have been so wise, and so clever, and so kind as this strange guardian fate had sent her. Her devotion grew and strengthened every hour. Childhood had been a dreary thing to her, and, for the matter of that, to him also. She had lived through an experience which no after joy could obliterate. Through the gates of sorrow she had passed into the care-laden world, and though her heart was at rest now, she bore the marks of that transit in her thoughtful face and grave, sweet eyes, and the anxious thoughts that even all her guardian's love could never quite banish.

She wanted to know the reason of things before ever

she could quite enjoy them. She was fearful of accepting pleasures which might hold consequences of pain or anxiety. Poverty in its sharpest and cruellest form had taught her a prudence far beyond her years, and to Dick her foresight and caution seemed almost pitiful in their maturity of care.

But it seemed, as he had ever laughingly declared, as if her presence had really brought him luck. After his pantomime a drama found its way on to the boards, and was so far a success that it not only ran for quite a long time in a slack and uncertain season, but produced an order for another play from his pen, and thus relieved him of the immediate pressure of necessity. He persuaded Mrs. Crustace to expend a little fresh paint and paper on his rooms, and even plunged into the extravagance of some new furniture and a brilliant Oriental rug, which turned his shabby den into a "thing of beauty."

What fun it was, going down on hands and knees and staining and varnishing the rough deal floor; what delight when the ugly boards grew rich and dark, and threw up those brilliant tints of the famous rug in a way far exceeding all anticipations!

For himself alone he would probably never have troubled about these matters, but Snow-white's delight and pride in them were so unbounded, that he could not resist the temptation of purchasing one embellishment after another, until the dingy, dreary room could scarcely have known itself, as Mrs. Crustace remarked.

By the time another Christmas Eve came round, it seemed to him that the child must always have been part and parcel of his life. He could not imagine it without her, and he let her take her place and portion in it with an ever-increasing content. Her care of him, and her thoughtfulness for him, were as touching as they were beautiful, and her love, in its mute expression of every look and action, needed no words to assure him of its depths. If his life had known no love before, it had an ample store showered down upon it now, and every day he blessed Heaven for it, and for her.

Worldly-wise in all necessary and imperative details of household life and household management, the child was yet simple and child-like in all things else. They might have seemed a strangely-assorted pair to others—her

guardian and herself—but they never seemed so to each other. She was beginning to know him and understand him, with the knowledge that comes only of constant communication with one mind; and her love for him had opened the flood-gates of a loving and most generous nature, hitherto shut up within itself, or expending its passionate tenderness upon a vanished dream.

So the years glided on, calmly, evenly, but rich with peace and love, with no hint or touch of a ruder awakening that still might lie within the folded leaves of Time's strange book of life.

CHAPTER IV.

HOW THE BEAR HAD A DREAM.

"Do you hear the bells, Dick?"

"I do, my child. But their sound is not so unfamiliar that I should run the risk of neuralgia, influenza, and various other complaints, by leaning with head and shoulders out of window as you have been doing for the last half-hour. Believe me, you would have heard them just as soon with the window closed.

A light step crossed the room.

"You lazy Dick!" said a voice—such a heart-whole, musical, delicious voice that to it hear was in itself a pleasure.

The individual apostrophised as "lazy" opened his eyes, took his pipe out of his mouth, laid it on the chimney-piece, rose to his feet, gave himself a shake, and then seated himself again.

"I do believe," he said, "I was half asleep."

"More than half asleep," said the girl, drawing a stool up beside him and leaning her head against his knee. "But you must wake up, for I want to talk to you very seriously."

"Seriously? Why, what has happened?"

"Nothing, as yet; but I have been thinking——"

"You do that too often," he said, in the little pause during which face and voice seemed to be taking an added gravity.

"Not half often enough, for I am too happy," she said, softly; "but, indeed, Dick, I have been thinking of—that letter of my grandfather's. You know it must be

answered ; you know that for this last month we have put off, and put off, doing so ; and now—well, it seems a shame to bring its discussion on to-night—our anniversary night, Dick, the night when we are always so happy ; but——”

“Ten years ago,” he interpolated gently, “my little girl came to me—my fairy maiden, who looked like a snow-flake herself. Ten years ago, and now she wants to leave me.”

“Never, Dick ! How can you say that ? It is cruel !”

“But, my child, to answer that letter seems to me equivalent to accepting its terms. How can I be selfish enough to dissuade you ? I am a poor struggling author. You—you might be a rich heiress if you would. Give me that letter ; you have it somewhere about you, I am sure.”

“It is here,” she said, drawing it from her dress, and putting it into his hand.”

“Well, now, let us consider its proposal : ‘I, Jasper Thornicroft, am willing to receive back Marguerite Delapierre, my granddaughter, into my house, and, further, to make her my sole heiress, in consideration of her at once and for ever leaving the roof and protection of my graceless scamp of a nephew, Richard Thornicroft, and giving me her promise, in writing, never to hold communication with the said Richard Thornicroft, of any kind whatever.’

“There ! It is not very flattering, nor very delicately worded ; but the meaning is clear. You would like to be an heiress, Snow-white, would you not ?”

“No, Dick, I have no such ambition, and not for a thousand fortunes would I make such a promise as he requires !”

“Foolish little girl ! Fancy throwing away such good gifts for sake of a cynical, graceless scamp like myself ! All the same, it is a little hard on us. We have been such good friends all these years. Money seems a sordid thing to part us.”

“Money shall not part us, Dick. Let me answer it as I wished at first. I waited this whole month because you would not let me decide in a hurry ; but, from the first hour I read this hateful letter——”

“Gently, Snow-white ! It is the composition of your nearest relative—your legal guardian. He has the right to enforce his claim if he wishes.”

“Oh, Dick, you frighten me !”

"Poor little child! I am sorry now I did not hide my light—my farthing rushlight—under a bushel, and only sign a *nom de plume* to my effusions. He would never have found you out then."

"But he gives me the choice, Dick; he does not say I must go to him."

"No; but, unless he has changed very much, the fact of your refusal will make him wildly anxious to obtain you. And I wish I could make you think more seriously of all you are sacrificing. An heiress is a person of importance, Snow-white."

"I'd rather be a nobody!"

"You might wear siiks and velvets to float down the rooms. I observe in novels that the rich and lovely heroines always 'float'; they never walk. I don't know how they manage it, I'm sure."

"I prefer my cottons, Dick."

"And Paris bonnets, and diamonds."

"Piles of artifice, and stupid bits of glass! No, thank you!"

"I really fear, Snow-white, that I have failed in giving you a feminine education, after all. There must be something wrong about a girl who doesn't yearn after millinery and jewels."

"You have given me a better education than ninety-nine girls out of every hundred get," she said laughing. "Of that I am quite sure. I would not change my knowledge, or my teacher, for all your conventional schools and systems."

"You know a great deal, I must say," he answered doubtfully; "but still, not half enough of—some things."

"What are the 'some things,' Dick?"

"The polishing, I expect," he said gravely; "the piano-playing, and dancing, and fancy-working, and novel-reading."

She laughed outright.

"What a catalogue of nonsense! I can appreciate music, if I can't murder sonatas and fugues on the piano. I can walk and run without instruction. I can mend and make my own dresses and clothes. That is fanciful enough work for me; and, as for novels, I read all yours. "I don't want to spoil their effect."

"Little flatterer, who taught you to reason so clearly?"

"Who taught me everything I know?—who has given me everything I could wish?—who has stood to me in place of parents, friends, relations, all these happy, blessed years? Oh, Dick, Dick!"

"Hush, dear—hush!" he said, deeply moved. "You women are too easily grateful when you are left to nature, and not art. It is good of you to love me, to have cheered me, and cared for me and my comfort as you have done—to have stood by me in good and evil fortune with never a word of complaint, but I must not exact too much from you. I dare not take from your youth and inexperience what more mature years might regard as a sacrifice. Until to-day it has seemed hardly possible that you could be anything but the little child who came to me in my loneliness like a gift from Heaven. But now I come to look at you. I see the child has grown into a maiden—the maiden will in turn become a woman, and then——"

"Her heart won't change though, Dick."

"I believe you are right," he said, with a deeper gravity in face and voice than had touched either yet. "So she must decide for herself, as she always does."

"Then she decides to say 'No' to this generous proposition."

"And the wealth and heirship? Think well, Snow-white."

"I have thought of all you have done for me. It is so much—too much for my heart to hold. I don't want to think of any other life, Dick."

"To be rich," he said playfully, "must be very nice—for a change. Fancy Snow-white in a carriage with a powdered footman."

"How frightened I should be of him!" laughed the girl.

"And then, when you went down the Strand, being able to give silver sixpences—or shillings if you like it better—to the poor little starving, homeless outcasts on those Saturday nights! But perhaps the Saturday nights would be given up. Grand ladies don't drop into the pits of theatres, and luxuriate in a supper 'off the grill.' That is altogether too vulgar, and Bohemian—eh, Snow-white?"

"I know nothing about grand ladies. I could not be one if I tried, and I don't want to try."

"Most irrational of maidens! What must the venerable

and said to his soul : ' Your life is for ever ; do not surrender yourself to what is vile and sordid. There is that within you whose birthright is of Heaven, and its immortal power shall teach you better things than the world you fain would serve.' He listened, and his heart grew light. Yet the truths he spoke out to the world were unwelcome, and its ears were unwilling ; and the years drifted by, and fame was still afar off, and life still a hard and weary struggle. Only now he was never hopeless, and there was that within his heart which warmed and fed it, and made his hours of toil less hard, and his spells of rest more sweet. He accepted his fate without complaint, and, living in the world, yet served it not as a slave, nor sought its favours as a suppliant. But one day he seemed to wake. The dream had lasted long. Youth had fled. He was an old man now ; his hands were weak, his hair was grey, his face was furrowed. He was poor, and still unknown, and almost friendless. He looked at himself in amazement. ' My heart has not grown old,' he said, ' but my body—what has come to that ? ' The reflection of that withered frame seemed to mock him, for the beautiful Hope in his heart had kept it young, and fresh and pure in faith with the breath of its own purity. The Hope was as a flower in a garden of weeds, and withered shrubs, and leafless trees. He looked, and it seemed to him as if it had no place there. It should be transplanted into some fairer, fresher soil, wooed by sweet airs of heaven, watered by tender showers, sunned by eternal sunshine ; and yet, without it, what a wilderness of desolation his heart would become ! And as he so thought, his eyes closed, and he dreamt again, and in that dream a form came to him, all light and glory, like an angel's, and it whispered, ' Fame has no age, and Hope has no limits ! ' and it touched the dry trees and they blossomed into leafage, and the withered shrubs, and they grew green and fresh, and the flower opened its tender heart, and its perfume was as a breath of heaven, and it bent its graceful head towards him, and the white petals grew flushed with rosy life, and the slender stem took shape and form, and the golden calyx turned into a halo of light about the brow, and lo ! it was a flower no longer, but a maiden sweet, and pure, and fresh as a spring blossom, and she said to the dreamer : ' Awake for me, for I——' "

" Oh, Dick, go on—go on ! "

"I—I cannot," said the speaker huskily, and he unclasped the hands from his knees almost roughly, and rose to his feet. "Finish it for yourself," he said, as he looked at the disappointed young face, "I grow too old for fairy-tales."

CHAPTER V.

THE ADVENT OF THE PRINCE.

"Oh, Dick, I have had such an adventure!"

The writer threw down his pen, and turned to the flushed, panting girl beside him with a look of terror.

"Good Heavens, child!" he cried, his voice shaken with strong emotion; "what has happened to you?"

"Look!" she cried, half laughing, half crying, and held up her gown all muddy and torn, and her hat broken and battered out of shape. "Did you ever see such an object? I've been run over, Dick!"

His face was white as death. She grew alarmed at his terror, and hastened to reassure him.

"Don't look so frightened, Dick; I'm not hurt—not the least in the world; but my rescuer is, poor fellow! He is down in Mrs. Crustace's parlour. I ran up to beg you to come to him. I think his arm is broken, or something. The horse's hoof was almost on my head. Why, Dick, you're not going to—to faint?"

He had sunk back in his chair, white as marble, his lips trembling like a woman's. This life—had he ever realised how precious it had become, till now an incident so small, so commonplace, a fate so narrowly averted, opened up before him a deep black gulf of desolation, showed him as by a lightning flash what that life meant for him, and him alone, in a city of teeming millions?

"I assure you I am all right," went on the girl eagerly; "not a bone broken anywhere; only this little bruise on my arm," showing him the round white flesh and dimpled elbow. "Poor Dick! did I frighten you so? It was too bad. But I did not think you were nervous."

"Nor did I," he said with an effort; "and where is this preserver of yours? I must go and thank him. You are sure you are not hurt?"

"Quite sure," she said, with her own bright smile of confidence and love. "Yes, do go and see him, Dick."

He was so brave, and oh, poor fellow! I'm sure he's dreadfully hurt!"

She turned as she spoke and went over to the door. The crushed hat had dropped at his feet. She did not see the gesture of passionate relief and gratitude with which he raised it, and for one second touched it with trembling, fervent lips.

"Heaven be thanked!" he said in his heart; "only to think of what might have happened—the loneliness, the despair, the desolation! Ah, Heaven is good to me, though I have not been half grateful enough for my treasure—not half, not half!"

Then he followed her down the stairs and into the "first-floor front" of which Mrs. Crustace was so proud. There, stretched on the couch, with face deathly white, and arm hanging helpless by his side, lay the man to whom he owed her safety. A young man and a handsome man, as he saw at a glance. A gentleman, too, if appearances went for anything, as it is natural to suppose they do.

"He has not come to," said Mrs. Crustace, who was occupied in dabbing the young man's forehead with vinegar-and-water. "I've sent Sammy, as was providential home from school, through bein' a half-holiday, you know, for a doctor. There's one, in the next street, I know, and—— Oh, and here he is, and the gentleman's opening his eyes. That's a good soul! Cheer up, now do! Why, you're a frightening the young lady as never was."

Commonplace elements enough these—too commonplace, one would have imagined, for a great sorrow or a great despair to found their tragic future upon.

Yet, after all, is anything in life quite commonplace?

The broken arm was set, and the patient soon easier and able to sit up, and talk, and receive the grateful thanks of the girl and her guardian. Deep feeling lent an almost passionate intensity to Dick Thornicroft's speech. This service was one that called out emotions he had never hitherto experienced, and the young man, looking at that fair face bent over him in its sweet compassion, thought to himself it was no wonder her father was so grateful.

Of course he was her father. He never for a moment doubted that. The rugged face, the leonine head, with its noble waves of iron-grey hair, the lined brow, and deep-set

eyes, were all striking in their way, but bore the stamp of mature years; and to the grace, and elegance, and youth that were his own possessions, they looked but the rightful heritage of paternity. Besides, Dick Thornicroft spoke of the girl as "his child" in the fond and habitual manner of familiar intercourse. So the young man delivered his card, and accepted their thanks, and was assisted into a hansom, still under the delusion that his new acquaintances were father and daughter, and ready almost to be grateful to the broken arm that had won such grateful looks from those wonderful eyes, such sweet thanks from that musical voice.

"It will do for one of your books, Dick," said the girl laughingly as the cab drove off. "Quite a romantic incident. Let me look at the name of my rescuer. Sir Raymond Eyre! Good gracious! a baronet. Why, Dick, it really is a romance! But I thought baronets were always old!"

Dick took the card from her hand in silence, and looked at it.

"He has done us a noble service," he said with effort; "but I suppose we shall never see him again."

"Oh," said the girl, with a little pout that gave her pretty lips a petulant charm as novel as it was delightful—"oh, Dick, don't say that. Fancy having a visiting acquaintance with a member of the aristocracy! How distinguished I should feel. Oh, I am sure he will call again. He said so."

"Men often say things to women they never mean," said Dick Thornicroft.

His heart smote him for the ill-natured expression that was prompted by so poor a feeling as envy—envy of his child's interest in one gifted by nature and fortune with a superabundance of those good things he himself had never possessed. What had come to him that he should speak thus, and to her?

She looked at him, a little surprised.

"You never do," she answered simply; and the words and the look awoke such a passionate revolution of feeling in his heart that he could find no expression for them, and only walked beside her up the old worn stairs, dumb, and joyful, and half afraid of a gladness that sprang at once from a source so small and yet so great.

That night there was an added tenderness in his manner to her. He put his work aside, and lent every charm of mind that he could command, to amuse, and interest, and delight her. Often and often had she told him his society had spoilt her for all other, but to-night she felt that fact as she had never felt it before. Was there some change in him that all unwittingly awoke a responsive echo in her own nature—that nature he had trained and taught so skilfully, till it seemed only right that it should catch the reflex of his own feelings, and answer the emotions of his own soul?

But when she had left him, and he looked at the neglected manuscripts, and remembered why he had so exerted himself during these past hours, a hot tinge of colour swept up to his brow. He felt ashamed of the feelings that had prompted him to set himself in rivalry against a possibility—the possibility of a young girl's romantic fancy.

"I have sheltered her, loved her, educated her, but she has repaid me for all," he muttered to himself. "What am I that I should demand more—that I should grudge another what I could never, never have hoped to keep for myself? I grow selfish with time. No doubt to her I seem old, and dull, and melancholy. Youth attracts youth. I—I think I was never young. And now——"

It was not vanity that made him give that short upward glance at the mirror above the mantelshelf: not vanity that scanned the rugged features, the iron-grey locks, the massive brow. But something had come to him in the shock of mingled terror and relief, when he had heard her story and seen the hero who had rescued her, that seemed to have roused him from a long sleep; something that seemed more cruel than misfortune, more bitter than death, more foolish than a boy's dream; something that tore at his heart sharply, cruelly; something that awoke the fires of jealousy, the hunger of passion, the woe and despair of an ended hope.

He remembered the look in those handsome, languid eyes—he remembered the soft colour that had come and gone on his child's face. His "child," alas! no longer.

"If he comes again," he thought—and his heart grew bitter and resentful. "Should I permit any further intercourse? Should I tear off this bud of fancy ere ever the sun of opportunity might ripen it into a flower? She is

mine—mine by right of rescue, of guardianship, of long years of love ; mine——” then he broke off, and again the red flush of shame rose to his brow.

“What a selfish brute is man !” he muttered, pacing to and fro the room, in a perturbed and restless fashion. “Love is a free gift, not a debt to be repaid. Fate must work its will in this instance as in that other. Strange that a boy’s dream should repeat itself in a man’s heart ! But it would not be easy to bear the loss—now.”

He passed his hand across his eyes ; a smile, half bitter, half sad, quivered shadow-like over his lips—a smile that would have brought the hot, sudden tears to his child’s tender eyes, had she been there to see it. It seemed to reveal the depths of a nature so used to sorrow, that each additional burden awoke more of patience than complaint. Then he went to his table, and began to work. That one panacea of grief, and trouble, and perplexity, was always at hand. It could surely serve him now, take something from the length of the weary hours, give relief to the brain, and turn it from melancholy musing and vain hopes to the brighter realms of fancy.

But to-night those doors of enchantment were closed. Thought seemed stagnant, imagination dulled. Some oppression, too heavy for relief, weighted his brain, and his pen traced but idle lines upon a blank page, while before him glowed the dawning loveliness of a girl’s fair face, and the smile of a child’s soft lips.

“It will be hard on me,” he said to himself. “But Fate has always been hard on me. Truly I am no favourite with the weird sisters !”

Then he threw aside his pen, and went back to the old leather chair, and sat there with his head bowed on his hands till far into the small hours of the New Year’s dawn. He was fighting a battle with himself—the hardest and fiercest he had ever waged—the battle against self, the subduing and beating down of a passion deep and true, yet distrustful of itself and its claims. His tenderness, and reverence, and chivalry for all womanhood stood him in good stead now. The greater the weakness, the more would he have scorned to take advantage of it. The stronger the claim he might enforce, the less would be his inclination to utter word or plea that would sway a weaker will, or influence a weaker nature.

All his life he had made but few friends. He had not the brilliant gifts, the ready tact, that allure and charm the world. Tenderness, refinement, extreme sensitiveness, and proud reserve are not types of masculine attractiveness. He was no hero to himself; he did not, in his own eyes, possess any gift or quality that could charm a woman. He was full of primitive beliefs and sentiments, such as the world would have laughed to scorn, but they had kept his heart young, his nature pure, and his mind clear and stainless. Not bad possessions these, even for a man, let the giddy youth, and *blasé* rake scoff at them as they will.

When he rose at last, the fire had burnt to dull grey ash the cold chill of dawn struck sharply on his frame. Everything around him was colourless and sombre, and his own face looked haggard and aged as by the passage of many weary years.

He straightened himself with an effort; his limbs were cramped and chilled by this long vigil.

"It is over now," he said with a deep drawn sigh, "over now. I have been a fool; but it is something to recognise one's folly—perhaps a step towards amending it. And, after all, she will never know—she will never know. I am no boy-lover, ready to purchase his treasure at any cost, but a man who would spare her, shield her, die for her; only fate has given me a harder task than that," and again the bitter smile quivered over his pale and firm-set lips. "For I must live for her—and be silent. Heaven in its mercy give me strength!"

There are not many men who could breathe such a prayer—not many. The face of the world might be changed for many a woman if there were.

CHAPTER VI.

THE PRINCE'S WOOING.

SIR RAYMOND EYRE was evidently not one of the men who say more than they mean—at least in this instance. He called as soon as medical permission gave him liberty to go out of doors. And he came again, and again, and yet again. He soon learned that these new acquaintances were not father and daughter; that only some distant tie of cousinship bound them; that the girl was nearest of kin to the miserly millionaire and great shipping merchant, Thorni-

croft, the child of his only daughter, who had run away from home, at the age of seventeen, with a penniless French adventurer. All this he learnt in fragments and by degrees from the girl's frank, guileless lips.

It was one of the effects, or defects, of her extraordinary education that she was absolutely fearless, and absolutely innocent. She talked to men as she would have done to women, only of the latter she knew but few, and of the former her acquaintances had been chiefly middle-aged, serious beings, given much to the propounding of strange theories, the discussion of deep science, or the pursuit of dilettante literature.

This new friend, who had come into her life with the charm of youth, of personal beauty, of rank and wealth, was quite a new study for her.

That also was one of the defects of her strange bringing up. She always wanted to study people—to read the nature, not the surface. Most girls are content with the latter, more especially if it is gilded with personal graces, and backed by the charms of rank and riches.

So she found herself studying her new companion, and mentally balancing his qualities with those of her own ideal of all that was grand and perfect in manhood.

She found him wanting. That was not to be wondered at, considering that life had hitherto presented him with no object for serious thought—being rather a vast playground for amusement, delight, pleasure, and frivolity. Pretty girls had flattered him by quickly yielding to his charm of manner. Bright eyes and smiles had strewn the path of his easy conquests. It was not wonderful that he should expect such homage as his due, and resent its absence in this one instance.

For Snow-white was absolutely indifferent to compliments, attentions, and flattery. Her grave, surprised eyes looked calmly back at his. Her serious mind weighed his words, and unhesitatingly rejected the sugared nonsense, and rent piecemeal the fabric of delicate flattery.

What mattered it to her that she was beautiful? She wanted no praise for a gift of nature. She puzzled the young baronet more and more. He forsook his club, his gay friends, his idle, pleasant life, and began to drop in, evening after evening, at the rooms of the strange, melancholy author in Arundel Street.

The author always welcomed him cordially, always chatted for a quarter of an hour or so on the topics of the day—the last new drama, the last new book, the possible split in the Cabinet, the chance of a foreign war—and then left him for the girl to entertain, while he went to his table in the corner and plunged deep into reference-books, or covered sheet after sheet of that pile of blue-lined paper. That was the invariable programme. A dull one enough, it would seem, for a denizen of the fashionable world, and yet Sir Raymond never seemed to find it dull.

This girl, so young, so beautiful, so innocently serious, so womanly wise, was a new and altogether charming study for him. He had saved her life; by the law of every heroic and romantic precedent he should have become to her a hero; a something to idealise, dream about, worship. He swore to himself that he would become so if it lay in the power of man. He knew he loved her as he had never thought it was in him to love; and he, to whom all things had been so easy all his life, thought it would be no hard task to make her love him. His tastes were fastidious, but she never jarred upon them. Absolute purity and refinement seemed the very elements of her life, despite its poverty, its drawbacks, its meanness and privations. Her exquisite face would have adorned a Court, and yet here she bloomed in this dull street, unknown and unseen! What a triumph to pluck this lovely flower for his own possession! To wear it on his breast for the world to marvel at! Such were the thoughts that filled his brain as he sat by the fire in that quiet room, watching the slender fingers that were never idle, winning question and response from the lovely lips that spoke so frankly and with so quaint a wisdom.

He was very happy, despite the unrest and uncertainty of his dawning passion. It would all come right—everything always had come right for him hitherto. Besides, he was not given to troubling himself greatly about the future. The horizon of his view was generally bounded by his own interests, as, indeed, is mostly the case with all humanity.

So he waited, and watched her; unconscious of the scrutiny of the deep-set eyes at that far-off table, of the pangs of jealousy, and fierce wrath, and futile agony which his low tones and tender glances brought to that watcher's heart.

To Dick Thornicroft these weeks were full of such suffering as never had he imagined was possible to bear; and not only to bear, but to live through, as if life were the same as ever, with duties to be performed and work to be done.

Never by word or deed did he betray that inward agony; never by a whisper stay her as she trod the flowery path of love's first dream.

But, though the work was done, and the mask worn, and the days lived through, there was not one day or hour that did not leave their mark upon his heart, and burn still deeper the brand of suffering.

He thought of the old knightly vow made so many years ago, when he had taken her, a helpless child, into his arms: "I will be your friend till death!" He must keep that vow at any cost. But the time was drawing to an end; the struggle must surely end ere long.

The blow fell at last.

Sir Raymond grew impatient, and wrote to him, as the girl's guardian, to tell him of his love—to lay before him, frankly and clearly, all the advantages of the union he proposed.

The letter came in the early days of February. He was reading it when she entered the room, her hands full of violets, which she had just bought at the door.

"Look, Dick!" she cried in her glad young tones. "I have brought you a breath of spring!"

He put the letter down. The blood seemed to have been drained from his face; he was as one stunned by a great shock. She did not look at him, fortunately. She was searching for a particular old china bowl in which to put her flowers. The search brought her at last to his side. The bowl was on the mantelpiece; the scent of the violets turned him sick and faint. Hurriedly he turned aside, striving for the self-mastery that was almost overthrown.

"How can I tell her? I have not strength!" he groaned in his heart.

Even as the bitter cry sounded, the moment of trial came. She saw the letter.

She knew the writing well. Many notes had come from him, with offerings of flowers, tickets for concerts or theatres, within those last few weeks.

"What has Sir Raymond been writing about?" she asked coolly, and took the letter up from the chimney-piece.

Dick turned abruptly, and almost snatched it from her hand; then, meeting her astonished look, he threw himself into the chair, and beckoned her to her old place on the stool. He did not want her to see his face, while he fought this last battle.

"This letter is to me," he said huskily, "but it concerns you. I am sure you will not be surprised when you hear that Sir Raymond Eyre wishes to make you his wife."

Silence—absolute silence.

How his heart beat! Could she hear its heavy, laboured throbs? Could she even dimly imagine the suffering he was enduring for her sake?

"You see," he went on presently, feeling it absolutely necessary to say something, however stupid, "I am not to be left in undisputed possession of my little girl. First one guardian, then another, proposes himself; but this"—touching the letter as it lay on his knee—"is serious."

"I suppose so," she said.

Her voice was very low and not quite steady. He saw her cheek had grown pale.

"I have stood to you in place of father so long," he said, controlling his voice with an effort, "that I feel I should be unworthy of my duties and responsibilities, if I did not point out all the advantages of such an offer. It is a woman's province to marry. True, you are very young; but this offer is one so generous, so important, and so full of advantages in every way, that any father would be proud to secure it. Wealth, and rank, and ease, and love. Ah, the Prince has come at last, Snow-white!"

"Do you think," she said, still keeping her face averted, and still speaking in that low, thrilling voice, that seemed to vibrate in his inmost heart, "do you think this—is—the Prince?"

"That is for you to say," he went on lightly. Lightly—yet he could have bent his head on the old, worn, broken chair, and have cried like a woman. "He must be, I should imagine. Only he comes in no disguise. Handsome, young, rich, loving you with all his heart. Ah, happy Snow-white!"

"And do you wish—would you mind very much if I left you, Dick?"

He could not tell her a lie. No, not even to content her. She looked up at him with those deep, mournful eyes—eyes which had never quite lost the shadow of their forlorn and wretched childhood.

He dared not meet them. He looked away into the leaping fire-flames.

"You must leave me—some time," he said, almost harshly—"as well soon as late."

A look of terror—of wild, passionate appeal—sprang into her eyes; then they dropped, her soft lips closed in a white firm line. "Leave him some time!" She had never thought of that—never imagined it for a single moment in all these happy years.

A certain pride and coldness came over her face; she rose from her stool. She was a child no longer. That one moment had sufficed to pass the boundary that separated her from the feelings and responsibilities, the pride and suffering of womanhood.

"I suppose I must," she said; and her head drooped a little. She held out her hand. He could not see how it trembled, for the blinding tears that were in his own eyes. "Will you give me that letter now?" she said. "I think I have a right to read it."

Without a word he gave it to her—without a word she took it, and so passed from the room and from his sight.

He stood there gazing at the door, his haggard face white and drawn with the inward struggle. Then a sudden cry escaped from his lips.

"Snow-white!" he whispered, "my own little child, you can't mean it! You won't leave me. Oh, how shall I bear it—how shall I bear it!"

There was no answer to the passionate appeal. Only for one minute the silence of the room was broken by a sound, than which there is no sadder on the earth—the sound of a man's hoarse, choking sob.

CHAPTER VII.

"AND THEY LIVED HAPPY EVER AFTER."

With hurt and angered feelings Snow-white went to her own little room, and there threw herself on the bed, crushing the letter in her hand with an utter disregard of its contents.

"I must leave him some time—that was what he said," she kept on repeating to herself. "He never meant me to taw with him always. How could I have thought so?"

Wave upon wave of bitter shame swept over her heart—shame for herself that she should have been so long content to be a burden on his charity—shame that the guardian she loved and honoured should be so easily content to let her accept the first offer of another home, and another love.

"I remember now," she cried with youth's passionate injustice, "how he urged me to accept my grandfather's offer, and I would not; but this—this time it shall be different. If I must leave him, it is indeed as well to go soon as late."

Then, dashing away the hot tears, she opened out the crumpled letter, and read its fond and generous words. To be loved like this, and by a stranger whom accident had thrown in her way—how strange! But, strange as it was, there was no throb of gladness in her own heart—no response to the loving words that told her of her power. Rather she felt frightened, and perplexed, and very sorrowful. Why should he love her? and why should he wish to marry her? Marriage! Why, she had never thought of it save as an abstract and wholly impersonal thing, and yet here was someone wanting to marry her, and Dick—Dick seemed to wish her to accept him.

Well, she would go to him with the letter in her hand, and bid him answer it for her.

"If I must go," she said sadly, "I had better go to someone who loves me, and wants me. Oh, if Dick had loved me as I thought he did, he would surely never have said that! It sounded so cruel."

Then she rose, and smoothed her ruffled hair, and washed away the traces of tears; and went to the old familiar room, which these ten past happy years had shrined as her home.

She opened the door and entered.

The sound of angry voices stayed her on the threshold. She stood and gazed in surprise at the unknown figure of an old and decrepid man. He was leaning on a stick; and his face, angry, and fierce, and terrible in its senile wrath, was turned towards her. Her presence seemed to strike

him dumb. He stood like a stone, and gazed at her as if he saw the ghost of some terrible memory.

"Who—who are you?" he cried at last, and half recoiled as she came towards him.

"Need you ask?" said Dick Thornicroft. "I think her face tells you for itself."

The stranger trembled, and sank down into the chair by his side.

"Margaret," he said faintly; "Margaret!"

It was his daughter's name—the name that for seventeen years had never passed his lips without a curse.

"You can tell her your errand yourself, now she is here," said Dick coldly. "You are her legal guardian, after all. Snow-white, this is your grandfather. Sir Raymond has pleaded his cause with him, and he has come to—to congratulate you."

The changed voice, the cold, cruel words, seemed to cut to the very depths of her tender heart. Dick to speak like this, and to her! Oh, what had changed him in so short a time?

She went timidly up to the old man; but he never touched her outstretched hand, only sat and looked at her with those wild, remembering eyes; and wrath, and baffled pride, and bitter fury stirred his heart as he thought of the daughter he had loved in his strange, selfish way, and who had defied and disobeyed him, and died without one word of penitence or regret.

"Well," he said at last, "you have found a lover—even here?"

The scorn in his voice stung her to the quick. She drew herself up with a sudden gesture of pride, and a serene composure that would not have misbecome a young queen.

"Why not here?" she asked simply. "There is nothing to be ashamed of in poverty."

He laughed shortly and scoffingly.

"Is there not?" Perhaps you will change your tune when you are 'my lady.' You have not done badly for yourself. I was curious to see you. I could not believe that young fool when he told me he would marry you; but you have a fair face—I suppose he thinks it worth a sacrifice."

"That is for him to say," she answered gently. "I never sought his regard."

"He is a young fool!" repeated the old man; "not that he will be doing ill for himself. After all, you are the only one of kith or kin who has any claim on me; and a baronet's wife—well, that is different to *this*!" with another contemptuous glance. "You were a fool not to accept my offer. I swore I would never make it again; but if you are going to make such a match, I will do what I promised before. You had better leave this wretched den and come to me. Your lover would be better pleased—that I know."

She grew deathly white. Her eyes turned piteously to Dick. His face was coldly and studiously averted. That offer—strange to say—came to him almost as a relief. How could he bear to see her, day by day, in her lover's company—to hear their happy voices—to listen to their plans and projects? It would be more than he could bear! Ah, no! If they must part, let it be at once. The sooner the wretch was over the better.

"Your grandfather is right," he said sternly. "This is no place for the rich and prosperous. Your fortunes are changed, and you must change with them. Go with him, as he desires. No doubt Sir Raymond has requested it. How could he bring his friends and relations to this miserable den, and introduce them to his future wife?"

"That, I think, is the first sensible speech I have ever heard you make in the whole course of your life," remarked the old man sneeringly. He rose from his seat and looked at them both—an evil glance in his eyes; a malicious smile on his thin, cruel lips. "When will you come?" he asked. "To-day?"

A little low cry of pain escaped her, despite herself.

"Oh no, no; not to-day. Give me a little time," she pleaded. "This is the only home I have known," she added slowly and with effort. "But, if Dick wishes, I will come to-morrow."

"Oh, Dick won't detain you," said the old man with a sneer; "and, since you are turning out so sensible, I will repay him for his expenditure on you during these ten years. He can send over the bill for food, and lodging, and all the etceteras. I know he has never been burdened with too much wealth."

Dick Thornicroft turned as if a blow had struck him. The blood leaped like a flame to his brow.

"Neither your age nor relationship gives you a right to insult me," he said, "You have said all that is necessary. Will you relieve me of your presence now?"

He did not see the girl's proud, grateful look. He walked to the door and opened it, and the old man, with a last, low, sneering laugh, and a warning to the girl to keep her promise on the morrow, obeyed the forcible hint, and took his leave.

Dick closed the door, and then, for the first time, looked at the girl. A bright flush burned on either cheek; her eyes were humid with tears; the strange feelings and experiences of this strange day seemed to have given her dignity and womanliness. For an instant her eyes met his, then sank before his stern and questioning gaze. A long silence fell between them both—they who had been so frank and ready of speech, so fearless in their mutual trust and confidence. He looked at her with a bitter yearning, but what he saw in her face arrested his powers of speech. He realised at last with what a love he loved her, with what a desolation her absence threatened him.

As he sat down in the old chair a weary sigh escaped his lips. In a second she was kneeling by his side; her tears fell like rain upon his hands.

"Dick," she said, "I have been a great burden, I see it all now; and you—oh, you were always too generous and too kind! But now—now that I am going away, won't you tell me you are sorry—just a little sorry to lose me—won't you say, just once more, that you love your little girl, that you know and believe she loves you, and is most grateful—oh, more than grateful to you for all that you have done for her in these happy, happy years, Dick?"

He could not speak. The strain was too great. He had borne it so long that the end had come at last. What would not that worn and haggard face, those passionate, yearning eyes have told her had she looked. But she did not look; she dared not. When she spoke again there was a ring of desperate appeal in her voice:

"I am afraid I have angered you, Dick—you are changed. Oh, forgive me, I would not pain or grieve you for worlds. Surely—surely you know that?"

"Yes, child—yes," he said hoarsely; "I know. You have never grieved me—never for one hour of all the many we have spent together."

"Then—then what has changed you, Dick? You cannot be as sorry as I am for—for the new life."

Her voice broke. He steadied his own by one last effort. He laid his hand on her fair, bowed head.

"The new life," he said, "will soon bring forgetfulness of the old. Do you forget the Prince?"

"No Prince will be what you have been," she said passionately. "I know that only too well."

His heart, for one mad moment, seemed to stop beating. He raised her head, and for a second's space his soul spoke out its secret, and her soul answered it with the guileless truth and perfect trust of yore.

"Snow-white," he cried, "Snow-white, don't you love him? Is he not more to you than I?"

"He—a stranger! Oh, Dick, Dick! What can you be thinking of?"

"Answer me, child!" he cried desperately. "Don't you want to go to him—to share his life; to be his, and his alone, through life—till death?"

She trembled greatly.

"I never felt like that," she said softly. "I was going to obey you; but, indeed, I never wished to share any other life or home but—this."

He rose to his feet then, unsteadily, strangely, like a man dazed and dreaming.

"This," he said, below his breath, "mine! You—you cannot mean it, Snow-white; even all my love——"

"Ah, you do love me, then!" she cried gladly. "You are not tired of me, or angry with me, Dick? You do not want me to leave you?"

"Heaven help me—never!" he cried, with such a ring of passionate yearning in his voice as startled her almost to fear.

She rose to her feet. She was trembling greatly.

"But you said I must—sooner or later."

"I did. I saw that you were no longer a child—that the eyes and words of men would tell you so. And I am old and world-weary, and you are fair and young. Is it not natural to suppose that you would love—and marry?"

"And that would part us, Dick; we could never be the same—quite the same again?"

"Never!" he said hoarsely.

The colour came and went in her face. She clasped and

unclasped the small and slender fingers so nervously interlaced.

"But if I did not—want—to marry?" she said, simply, shyly, like a child.

A great radiance swept over his face.

"Do you mean," he whispered, coming nearer to her in the agitation and excitement of so great a surprise, "that you don't love the Prince—after all?"

"I love no one but you, Dick. Who in the wide world could ever be what you have been?"

A mist seemed to clear away before his eyes. Had he been so foolish and so blind, after all? Did she mean—could she mean that he——?

He drew a sharp, quick breath. He touched the nervous fingers with a trembling supplication.

"Child," he said, "does it seem impossible that I should love you as—as the Prince does? I, who am old, and rugged; and have neither youth, nor good looks, nor riches?"

She met his eyes then. Oh, what a glory and gladness were in her own! What a flood of golden sunlight seemed let loose upon the quiet, dingy room, and upon her.

"It does seem impossible," she said below her breath. "Too wonderful, too good, that you should love me, Dick, so much!"

"With an undying love," he said solemnly; "with a love that has grown with your growth; gathering strength and fervour with each added year; that seeks your happiness first, Snow-white. That not even for itself and all its passionate pain would accept a sacrifice that you might one day regret. So now you know all. Two paths of life lie open before you. One holds rank, riches, power, ease, delight; the other, only poverty—and a man's great love."

The little fingers did not tremble now, only nestled firmly in his clasp. A lovely colour swept like light over her face—the face uplifted to his own, with all the worship and devotion of her pure young heart speaking out in every eloquent line.

"I will choose the path," she said, "that we can tread together, Dick."

Locked in his arms, held closely to his beating heart, all doubts and misunderstandings swept away for ever—what a moment was that!

For long the happy silence was not broken, save by tears that sprang from joy's deep unsealed fountain. For long the full hearts—so nearly severed—could find no words that might express their passionate relief.

Only at last, half crying, half laughing, she drew herself away. "You are sure," she said—"quite sure you do not wish to send me to the Prince?"

"Heaven forbid!" he said, smiling too as he followed the glance of her eyes to the old shelf, and the old fairy volume. "Not if you have the bad taste to prefer the bear. But there is nothing to disenchant him, Snow-white. He is old, and rugged, and ugly, and must remain so."

"Not to me—oh, never, never to me," she cried with passionate denial, and drew the noble head down upon her own young heart, and kissed with tender passion the rugged brow. "To me you are handsomer, and nobler, and more worthy to be loved than any Prince that ever lived!"

"I thought I was too old for fairy-tales, Snow-white; do you remember?"

"I remember," she said, with that lovely smile upon her lips, "that you told me to finish the last one for myself. And so I will. The flower had turned into a maiden, and she said to the dreamer, 'Awake for me, for—I love you!' Will that do for an ending, Dick?"

THE END OF THE FIRST VOLUME OF THE HISTORY OF THE LIFE OF THE LATE KING OF THE NETHERLANDS BY J. VAN DER HAEGHE

In The Vaults.

CHAPTER I.

"GLYNNE, I want a few moments' serious conversation with you."

Sir Glynne Trefusis stopped on his way out of the breakfast-room at Clydesmore, and looked in surprise at the stately white-haired old lady who had spoken these words.

"Certainly, mother," he answered with the genial courtesy so natural to himself. "I am quite at your service."

"Then go to the library, and I will follow you in a few moments," said Lady Trefusis, as she slowly folded a letter she had been reading, and replaced it in its envelope.

Sir Glynne, still with that bright smile on his handsome boyish face, and the look of wonder deepening in his sunny eyes, bowed and left the room.

"Now what can the dear old mater have to say?" he thought to himself as he stood by the window, and looked restlessly out on the wide expanse of park and woodland stretching for miles round, until it reached the wild crags and wilder headlands of the sea. The young owner of it all might well have been satisfied with the beauty of his possessions, for few places in England could vie with the magnificence of Clydesmore. He was but three-and-twenty and yet he had stepped into his sovereignty already, as naturally as a young king before whom the prospect of royalty has been always displayed, and to whom its honours fall as a birthright.

Sir Glynne's father had only married late in life, and his son had not been born for many years after that marriage. It was therefore almost natural that both parents should idolise the beautiful and eagerly desired heir; and their worship grew with the boy's growth, and was strengthened daily by his own loving disposition, sweet temper, and great abilities. If Sir Glynne had a fault it was a certain

indolent *bonhomie*, that often made him weakly yield to the influence of others, more from fear of giving pain than from the conviction his so yielding was right. He hated the sight of sorrow and distress. He would have had all the world bright and happy as himself, and since this could not be, he avoided as much as lay in his power any sight or sound that jarred on his beauty-loving sympathetic nature.

He was very young, and life had been a very beautiful and a very happy thing to him as yet. He had known no disappointment, no treachery, no faithless friendship, no betrayed love. Fortune had given him great personal attractions and many high and noble gifts. He had never known an unfulfilled desire or a personal sorrow till his father's death, and that had been so gradual, so feeble a decline, so natural a fading of age and weakness, that it seemed almost to still any passionate outpouring of grief, and to check the violent overflow of a too great sorrow.

For six months he had been master of Trefusis Court, and those six months had been spent in almost entire seclusion. Yet he had never known a dull hour, a day of weariness; but through all those months he had never asked himself why.

There are times in the life of the young when to dream is far sweeter than to awaken and know the cause of such a dream. When to linger on in a lotus-eating existence, each day full of sweet vague hopes, of shadowy bliss, of fancies so fair in their sublime folly that we might sooner weep than laugh at them—is all the joy we ask of life. When the past has nothing to regret, the future nothing to promise, the present holds all worth living for. Such a time had come to Glynne Trefusis.

He was dreaming even now as he looked out at the great vales of oak, and beech, and elm, through which, in the far-off morning sunlight, flashed the distant sea, visible only from this one room in all that great mansion. He was dreaming still as the rustle of his mother's dress fell on his ear, and though he turned at once to greet her, there was a far-off absorbed look in his eyes which told of thoughts astray and wandering out of reach of her grasp or ken.

"You wished to speak to me," he said, handing her a chair. "I cannot spare you more than a quarter of an hour. I have promised to ride with Irene at eleven."

"It is of Irene I wish to speak to you," said his mother

quietly. "You are too much with her, Glynne. For your own sake and hers I must warn you. You are the descendant of a great and ancient race. Irene Castroni is but a poor dependant, the daughter of your father's secretary, and living on here as my companion, because I pitied the friendless child so early orphaned, and resolved to befriend her for the sake of her father's services and her own abilities. But of late, Glynne, you have taken too much notice of this girl. Her head is turned; she is wilful, petulant, haughty, and overbearing. All her good qualities seem to have left her, and I see that a fierce ambition is usurping their place. A mother's eye is quick to read the faults and failings of the woman to whom her son's fancy has strayed; and, Glynne, I hope and pray it is no more than fancy yet with you. Admire Irene Castroni as you like, but never give your heart into her keeping. She would not make you happy, and if you were infatuated enough to marry her, not only would you be the first Trefusis who has married beneath him, but also I foresee for you a terrible awakening when your boyish dream is over, and you know what it really is to love."

A dark wave of colour had crept slowly up from Sir Glynne's cheek to his very brow, as he listened to those warning words. His lotus-dream was over now. The sharp reality drove away all the subtleties of fancy, all the fantastic imagery with which he had decked out his boyish love, and into his heart there crept a conviction that his mother was right; that her quick eyes had seen beyond the mere beauty that had blinded him, and that in this fancy there was no peace and no content, only the restless passion of a young and eager heart, which craves for bliss, and yet knows the bliss it craves is as unsubstantial as a shadow.

As the red flush faded away Sir Glynne looked frankly into the loving, watchful eyes bent on him.

"You are frightening yourself about nothing, mother," he said, smiling. "I like Irene Castroni; she is a beautiful, high-spirited, intelligent girl! if she were my sister or my cousin I should treat her just as I do. We have known each other from childhood, and are the best of friends; but as to marrying her, frankly and truthfully, mother, the idea had never entered my head till you put it there."

"My dear boy," said the old lady gratefully, "you don't know how happy you have made me—of what a weight

you have relieved my mind. But you must be more cautious in your conduct to Irene. Girls are impressionable and romantic, and she comes of a race hot-blooded, head-strong and remorseless. In her own mother's life was a fearful tragedy, and the daughter inherits too much of her headstrong nature to please me. I blame myself for allowing you such constant intercourse with her, but I forgot you had both left childhood so far behind, and of late my great grief has absorbed me, to the exclusion of many duties I still have to fulfil."

"Well, set your mind at rest," said the young baronet gently. "I am not going to add any fresh worries or grievances to your stock. I have never even thought of marrying yet, and if I do"—he laughed brightly—"well, under those most improbable circumstances, I give you my word of honour I will take you into counsel before I go through the ordeal of proposing."

A knock at the door at this moment interrupted the colloquy.

A footman entered, and, addressing Sir Glynne, said, "If you please, sir, Miss Castroni desired me to say she was waiting for you, and the horses are ready."

The words had hardly left his lips when Lady Trefusis turned sharply round.

"Give my compliments to Miss Castroni," she said haughtily, "and say that I have business to transact with Sir Glynne this morning, and she can take one of the rooms with her when she goes for her ride."

The man bowed, and left the room.

"Mother!" exclaimed Sir Glynne reproachfully, "what have you done? She will think me so rude; and you know I hate to break my word."

"I cannot help it, my dear," said the old lady with dignity, "Miss Castroni has no business to send such a message to my son, and the master of this house."

Sir Glynne looked a little disturbed. The increasing insolence and audacity of the beautiful Italian girl had not struck his notice as they had his mother's, but he hated to hurt anyone's feelings, and he knew Irene would be vexed and annoyed at this non-fulfilment of his promise. However, his mother must of course be the first consideration; so he shook off his vexation and gave his attention to her once more.

"What is the next weighty matter?" he asked lightly.

"This!" said Lady Trefusis, laying a letter she had that morning received on the table before him. "Lady Clara is coming on her long promised visit at last. She will be here to-morrow. Her mother is going off on one of her voyages to—goodness knows where—to collect materials for a new book, of course, and so Clara has received permission to stay with me. I am sure you will like her, Glynne, and be great friends. She is a charming girl, and a universal favourite."

"So there will be two girls in the house now," said Sir Glynne. "Rather hard on me, mother, to have to do all the entertaining, don't you think? Let me ask Captain D'Arcy down also. The shooting begins next week, and I daresay he'll be glad of some sport. There are not many coverts to beat the Clydesmore."

"Certainly, ask him down," said Lady Trefusis cheerfully. "We cannot, of course, have a large party this year, but one or two of your friends will be very welcome."

"Then I'll write the notes at once," said Sir Glynne, who was always eager to put every new project into immediate execution. "I'll ask D'Arcy, and he can bring his cousin, Jack Conyers, too. We were great chums at college."

"Very well; I will leave you to write your letters, as I have to see about the preparations for Clara," said Lady Trefusis, rising. "I am glad you have taken what I said in such good part. Believe me, my dear boy, I spoke only for your good, and with your best and truest interests at heart."

"I am sure of that," said Sir Glynne gravely, as he touched her forehead with his fresh young lips. "Never man had kinder or more unselfish mother than I. It would go hard with me to refuse you anything, believe that."

"My dear noble boy," said the old lady, the tears dimming her dark-blue eyes that once had been bright and sunny as Glynne's own.

"Am I in love?" mused Sir Glynne thoughtfully, as he sat, pen in hand, in the quiet library, his letters still unfinished, his eyes wandering ever to the brilliant sunshine and shady leafage of the park beyond. It was an hour since his mother had left him, and he had not finished his correspondence yet.

"Am I in love?" He moved uneasily in his chair even as he put the question to himself, and a look of restless pain came into the violet depths of those sunny eyes, to which laughter seemed ever the most natural thing. He reviewed the pleasant hours he had spent, the walks and rides, the constant companionship of a lovely and gifted girl; and yet had all this left him heart-whole?

He might have doubted it but for the repugnance the idea of marriage had brought with it. Marry Irene Castroni? No; such a thought had never crossed his mind. Marriage in itself was as yet a bondage distasteful to him. He loved his liberty, and life was full of enjoyments and pleasures which the irresponsibility of bachelorhood made doubly agreeable. The best answer to his own question lay in this very disinclination. Had he really loved, no other thought but that love would have presented itself to his mind, and existence without the object of his passion would have looked a very dreary and barren affair indeed. As it was — well, as it was, he dismissed the subject with a faint sigh, wrote his letters, then lit a cigar, and strolled out into the deer-park. Sunshine and fresh air would soon dispel the slight gloom which had settled on his usual careless happy spirits. They, at least, were companions of whom he never wearied.

The tints of autumn were on the leafage; now and then a hare darted through the grass, or a bird's wing rustled the low arched boughs. It was all very calm, very still, very beautiful. The young owner of the Court had seen many lands, and travelled in many countries. He had tasted the sweets of society and solitude; but his love for his home was never shaken by any beauty or any splendour that allured his fancy for the time. It remained deep, enduring, steadfast, a part of his own nature, from which no love of change nor enthusiasm for other scenes could move or allure him. He looked around now with even a deeper fondness, a graver reverence than was usual to him.

"One ought to live worthily to be worthy of such a birthright," he thought; and the motto of his race bore a new meaning, as it flashed across his mind, "Honour before all."

"No, I could not bring a wife here unworthy of such a heritage. She must be pure and true, and of stainless

lineage, as all our women have been." And as he thought this the memory of a bright, bewitching, mutinous face flashed before his mind, and even while it allured, it chilled him too.

He threw his cigar aside impatiently and plunged deeper and deeper into the heart of the woods. But suddenly he paused; his steps had made but little sound on the moss-grown path, not enough, it seemed, to disturb the dreamy repose of a young girl standing under a cluster of copper-beeches, with clasped hands and drooping head, and a certain statuesque grace in the slight and supple figure that made her a fair picture in that fair scene.

The young man watched her a moment in silence. Of what was she thinking? He noted the dreamy languor of her attitude, the poise of her graceful head, the strange listlessness and stillness of one to whom motion and life were constant attributes.

Involuntarily he took a step forward, and quick as a lightning flash she turned and faced him. He had always thought Irene Castroni beautiful. He had never fully realised how beautiful she could be till she stood before him now. She was like light or flame, or anything wild, brilliant, untamable, and difficult to define. A certain restless fire shone in her brilliant eyes, and burned in the crimson of her cheeks, and irradiated the swift, subtle, bewildering changes of expression in the whole face. It was an exquisite face, but it had no repose, no rest. Its very brilliance bewildered while it charmed. One felt the girl might be always enchanting, often dangerous, never womanly.

Sir Glynne hesitated, as she flashed round on him in her impetuous southern fashion.

"Ah," she said, "it is you. Why did you disappoint me of my ride this morning? I thought you never broke your word?"

"My mother wanted me. I really could not help it," said the young baronet, flushing hotly beneath the glance of those dark indignant eyes.

A contemptuous smile curled the rich red lips.

"Your mother!" she echoed mockingly. "What a dutiful son you have suddenly become!"

"I hope I have always been that," he said lightly. "I am very sorry I could not keep my promise, but on this

occasion I really could not help it. Won't you overlook the offence for once?"

"For once!" echoed the girl bitterly. "Oh yes. I know what that means. A precedent for future failings of a similar description. But, of course, dependants should not expect courtesy to be strained on their behalf. They must be thankful for what they get."

"I hope you don't consider I would treat any lady discourteously," said Sir Glynne hotly. "Your remark is not only unjust, but uncalled for."

"It is neither," she retorted. "I *am* a dependant. I have been made to feel that often enough. Not by you"—and her voice softened with seductive sweetness—"I will give you your due there, but by others—first and foremost, Lady Trefusis."

"I do not think my mother has ever treated you with coldness or discourtesy," said Sir Glynne coldly. "You must have grown over-sensitive to fancy such a thing."

"Must I?" She gave him a look—a long strange look. It made his heart beat; it woke again the soft romantic worship he felt for all living beauty, but it woke also a pang of regret, a chill of fear, for, as he met her eyes, and watched the flush that rose to her face as she stood before him there, he knew at last that she loved him. The knowledge brought no thrill of gratified vanity, no sweetness of reciprocated passion—only a great remorse and an intense shame. His own cheek warmed with a flush as deep as that which glowed on hers; and beautiful as she looked standing there, beneath the burnished gold of the sunlit-leaves, there yet was in her beauty something wild, untamed, repellent, and his eyes told her so ere he himself knew aught of their revelation.

There was a long awkward silence. Irene moved one slender foot to and fro over the thick carpet of dry leaves on which she stood. Conflicting emotions were at work within her breast, but anger was the predominant feeling there. She had counted so surely on this prize; she had spared neither pains nor artifice to gain it, and it seemed harder of attainment than ever. With a great effort she looked up at last; her brilliant eyes humid, and a repressed melancholy in her tone which made him feel as if he had been guilty of some cruelty towards this bright and beautiful creature, and smote him to the heart

with keenest self-reproach. "Perhaps I am over-sensitive," she said, in the softest sweetest accents of her sweet southern voice. "But you can hardly blame me for it. I am placed in an unfortunate position. I have neither home, nor relatives, nor friends, and, kind as you have all been to me here, yet——"

She paused. Surely he would speak now? Surely he would tell her that he would supply the place of all others? Had not his eyes looked love to hers often enough; had not his voice taken tenderer tones for her ear than for any other woman? Was he not young, passionate, impressionable; and had she not loveliness and witchery sufficient to involve his heart into closer allegiance still?

"Yet no kindness can supply their place," he said gravely, finishing her sentence for her in a very different manner to what she had intended. "I can understand that, sorry as I am that you have experienced the feeling."

"Is it any wonder I have experienced it?" she asked with one of those whirlwinds of anger sweeping over her which he had hated to see in their childish days, which of late had been so skilfully hidden, that he had almost forgotten their existence. "I hate your nation, your country, your ways! You are all cold as ice, and proud as you are cold. You have no sympathy, no tenderness. Show, wealth, magnificence, exclusiveness, these are your gods; your very youth is chilled with the prudence of worldly maxims, your hearts are trammelled like your lives; to me it seems detestable. If there is one thing I thank Heaven for each day I live, it is that I am not English!"

"Irene!" exclaimed Sir Glynne in astonishment.

The sound of his voice recalled her to herself, and showed her the imprudence of which she had been guilty. With a violent effort she calmed the storm within her breast, and turned to him with great tears swimming in her eyes, with a sadness and reproach in her voice that touched him very deeply. "Forgive me!" she said hurriedly, "I was impulsive—wrong, I know. But indeed, I have things to grieve me that you know nothing of, and I am often most unhappy."

The faltering accent of those last words touched him deeply. All the chivalry of his manhood, all the passion of his hot youth sprang to life before it. His hand trembled, his heart beat with rapid painful pulsations,

another moment and he might have uttered the rash words rising to his lips, but all unknowing of the impulses at work, she suddenly bent forward and seized his hand, then pressed her hot and trembling lips on it, and hurried swiftly away. Anger, passion, wounded pride, fierce love, and disappointed ambition were raging like fever through her veins, and lashing her whole wild undisciplined nature to fury. She could not trust herself to hide this from his eyes. When these paroxysms overtook her, solitude was her only safeguard, and to solitude she fled now, leaving him amazed, hurt, disturbed—but heart-whole still.

It was well that he did not follow her; better still that he did not see her lying face downwards on the grass, her hands clenched, and her face disfigured from all likeness to womanhood. She tore the soft turf up, she buried her face in it to keep back the screams and groans that racked her with hysterical violence, and writhed and swayed beneath the almost demoniacal fury of this storm of passion, until at last it left her, spent and exhausted, but sane and calm once more.

Then she went back again to the house which she hated, yet coveted, to the life which an unworthy ambition and an unreasoning love had cursed and embittered.

CHAPTER II.

“GLYNNE, this is Lady Clara.”

The young man had just entered the drawing-room; it wanted but a few moments to the dinner-hour. His mother's words arrested him midway in the room; he had forgotten that a guest was expected. He bowed to the fair-haired girl standing by his mother's side, and then raised his eyes to her face with a faint feeling of curiosity. Their glances met, and parted as quickly; but Sir Glynne thought he had never yet seen so sweet a face as that which looked at him from out that mist of pale-gold hair, nor read in any eyes so pure and beautiful a nature as those long-lashed soft brown orbs betrayed.

Many and many a time that evening did he watch and observe the face, marvelling in what lay its rare charm, its indescribable attraction; and never could he quite satisfy himself that he had discovered the cause of either. Was it the radiant smile which ever and anon curved the fresh

sweet lips ; or the brightness of expression ; or the child-like wistful eyes, which changed so swiftly from gravity to laughter, and were at once so softly sad, so brightly gay ? Sir Glynne could not tell.

But the dawning admiration in his glance had not passed unnoticed, and Irene, watching him with a dangerous gleam under the shade of her curling lashes, muttered between her close-set teeth : " If he loves her, let them beware ! "

Three happy weeks had drifted by. The party at Clydesmore seemed gay and light-hearted enough. Sir Glynne and his two friends alternated their time between the pleasures of sport and the companionship of the two girls.

Impromptu picnics, drives, and excursions had been constantly projected and carried out. Lady Trefusis was the most obliging and good-natured of dowagers, and the most lenient of chaperons. The girls enjoyed, or seemed to enjoy, every simple amusement, and time never hung heavily on their hands.

Irene had a devoted and ardent admirer in Jack Conyers, and Lady Clara Effingham was equally the object of devotion on the part of Sir Glynne and his friend Cuthbert D'Arcy. As yet the rivalry was good-natured enough, though Sir Glynne had begun to acknowledge to himself that he thought a great deal more of the beautiful girl than was conducive to rest or tranquillity of mind. The hours seemed very long now when he was absent from her side, and the modified feeling with which he had at first noticed her acceptance of Captain D'Arcy's attentions had gradually become one of grieved and painful anxiety. He found himself always watching her, wondering about her, marvelling at the grace which surrounded every action, the sweet sympathetic nature which was so kindly alive to any tale of sorrow or distress.

Lady Trefusis adored her, and was never weary of singing her praises. Sir Glynne was rapidly following her example, but Irene Castroni, watching with increasing dread her rival's power, and seeing how completely she herself was forgotten, grew daily more bitter and revengeful ; fancied slights where there were none ; avoided Lady Clara as much as lay in her power, and gave herself up to

a brooding malicious hatred of her that would have stooped to any trickery so that she might sweep so powerful a rival from her path.

"He is always with her now," she muttered one evening as she watched Sir Glynne bending over the piano on which Lady Clara was playing. "I did well enough to amuse him while he idled the summer hours away here. He did not fear to teach me the lesson he now tries to teach her. He could look into my eyes, and linger by my side, and say all soft and fanciful things, to which my heart might lend its own interpretation. But this is all forgotten now. I am not an earl's daughter: only a poor dependant on his mother's charity! Well, poor as I am, they may yet find I have the power to avenge myself for the wrongs I have suffered at their hands. I am not one to be lightly trifled with, and one day they may find it out!"

Indeed, she did not look one to be trifled with as she stood there within the shade of the heavy velvet curtains, her eyes dark and fierce, her small hot hands tightly clenched till the nails hurt the soft and delicate flesh, her little white teeth set firm and fast on the pouting crimson lips. But no one saw her there, and no one imagined how terrible a tragedy was soon to be enacted in their very midst.

"Are you dreaming as you play?" enquired Sir Glynne of his companion. A soft pink flush rose to her cheek, but she kept her eyes on the keys instead of giving him the glance for which he had been longing.

"I generally do," she said shyly. "It is a bad habit, I am afraid. I often play on for an hour at a time, and cannot remember what I have been playing."

"Very trying for your audience, I should say," laughed Sir Glynne.

"Oh, I don't do it when I have an audience," she said quickly.

"And pray do you consider you have been playing to nobody all this time?"

She laughed.

"Not exactly, Sir Glynne. I know Lady Trefusis appreciates music, so does Miss Castroni, but as for you and your family——"

"What a significant pause! We do not appreciate the

music perhaps, because we think so much more of the player."

"Thereby proving you have no real love for art," she said quickly. "The player is the last person you should think of. She but interprets to the best of her poor ability."

"But where would be the use of the art without an interpreter? It would be like a sealed book to most of us. However, we won't drift into an argument; I want to know what you were thinking of so deeply while your fingers were breathing out melody to your unappreciative audience."

She flushed hotly.

"I—I was thinking of a dream I had last night," she said hesitatingly.

"A dream! Do you believe in dreams sufficiently to let one disturb your waking moments?" asked Sir Glynne in wonder.

"Not as a rule; but this was so strange I cannot shake off its memory."

"May I ask what it was?"

She paused. Her fingers struck a few weird chords, then wandered off into a sad minor key, weaving for themselves an accompaniment to her words.

"I dreamt I was wandering in a dark lonely wood," she began. "There was no light anywhere; but what struck me most was the intense stillness around and about. Not a breath of air rustled the boughs; not a leaf stirred in the brooding heavy air. All was silent, and the weird gloom deepened and closed round me like a thick black wall, through which I vainly strove to make my way. I groped along in a fear that had no tangible form, yet took stronger and stronger hold of me at every step. I stretched out my hands to aid my progress, but everything they touched was cold and damp, and struck a chill to my heart. I looked up in despair, praying for some gleam of light from moon or star in this most terrible unending gloom, and then as I looked a pale green flame rose slowly over the stirless trees which hemmed me in so closely, and wherever the light fell I saw the grinning features of a skull. The branches were full of them, and, to my horror, as the light grew brighter and more clear, each stem took the shape of a skeleton, each branch stretched over that

pathless solitude became long, bony, fleshless arms. In my dread and horror I screamed aloud, and as I screamed I awoke! That was all."

The music died away like a sigh. She took her hands from off the keys, and a shudder ran through her whole frame.

"Don't laugh at me," she said earnestly. "I am not fanciful or imaginative as a rule, but I cannot shake off the feeling that this dream has left upon me. It has haunted me the whole day through."

"I am not laughing at you," said Sir Glynn, earnestly. "I was only marvelling at a strange coincidence, for last night I, too, had a dream, and it was the same in every detail as your own."

"What are you two discussing so earnestly?" asked Lady Trefusis suddenly from her corner. "Won't you play again, Clara?"

"Not to-night, please," said the girl hurriedly. "But perhaps Miss Castroni will sing. It is such a treat to hear her voice."

"Irene, my dear, will you favour us?" asked the old lady kindly. She had grown very gentle of late to the wayward girl, reading in her sad eyes, and feverish gaiety, and fitful spirits, some of the trouble that was filling her passionate wilful heart.

"Yes, I will sing," said Irene coldly, and swept past Sir Glynn with proud head and flashing eye, and such a torrent of jealous angry pride swelling in her breast as would have made him shudder could he but have guessed its existence, or even its cause.

"So these are the Trefusis vaults?" said Lady Clare. "What a weird, eerie place!"

"Is it not?" said Sir Glynn, reining in his horse beside his fair companion. "Yonder is the ruined abbey. It is still a show place in the neighbourhood, but no one ever dares come here after dusk, for the place is supposed to be haunted."

"Is there a story about it?" asked Lady Clara curiously.

"Oh, yes, and a very terrible one. Don't ask me to tell it you, it is worse than your dream."

Lady Clara and Sir Glynn had ridden over to the ruins in company with the rest of the party this bright September

afternoon, and, as had often happened of late, they had dropped behind the others, and now found themselves beside the old vaults which ran underneath the abbey, and were the resting-place of many a dead and gone Trefusis.

It was a gloomy, wild-looking spot, as Lady Clara had said. Dark trees thickly planted and heavy with foliage hemmed it in on every side, the roar of the sea sounded hoarse and sullen as it dashed against the tall cliffs beyond. The grey ivy-crowned ruins lay weird and desolate even in the warm bright sunlight. No wonder Lady Clara shivered as she looked around, and Sir Glynne's careless sunny face grew grave and thoughtful.

"The vaults are very curious and well worth exploring," he said presently; "but I suppose you would hardly care to trust yourself in such a place even under my guidance."

The girl blushed softly.

"You must not think I am such a coward," she said, smiling. "I should like to see them very much, only—" she hesitated and looked round—"the others have all gone on—and don't you think there is a storm threatening?"

"I see a cloud 'no bigger than a man's hand,'" laughed Sir Glynne. "I am not much of a weather prophet, but I certainly fail to see any sign of storm in that clear sky."

"How do you get in?" asked his companion, looking timidly down at the moss-grown, time-worn steps, which led to an iron doorway rusted and decayed now.

"The key is kept in a little room in that tower over there," said Sir Glynne. "It is the only place in the mouldering old abbey that is in good repair. A deaf old man minds it—a crazy, queer old fellow, who is over eighty years now, but who has an odd fancy for the place, and has lived there ever since I can remember. I will go and fetch the key, if you like, while you dismount. It won't take us long to see the vaults, and we can soon overtake the others."

Lady Clara assented. She was eager to see this strange weird spot which Lady Trefusis had often described. In company with Sir Glynne her foolish fears vanished; she sprang from her mare and fastened the bridle to the branch of a tree close by, then gathered her habit in her hand, and stood awaiting Sir Glynne's return. He soon came to her on foot.

"I left the Erl King over there," he said, nodding in

the direction of the little tower. "I found the old man asleep, so I took the key from its hiding place. Only he and I know where it is kept. I see you have fastened your horse. I need not do that to the Erl King. I have only to bid him remain where I leave him, and he won't stir."

"He is a beautiful creature," said Lady Clara, following him down the broken slippery steps.

"Take care," said her companion, turning round; "this moss is very slippery. You may judge the vaults are not often troubled with visitors."

"So it seems," answered the girl, marvelling again why such a shuddering dislike to the spot crept over her.

The key grated in the rusty lock and Sir Glynne made some laughing remark about it, but something in the heavy lonely stillness, and the weird gloom, and damp mouldy smell, as the door swung back on its hinges and revealed the interior of the crypt, chilled the laugh and made him grave once more.

"Leave the door open," entreated Lady Clara as she followed him in.

"Of course," he assented readily; "I don't want to feel as if I were buried alive. But you see there is plenty of light. Is it not artfully managed? Those loopholes are quite invisible from the outside."

"What an enormous place," said the girl wonderingly, as she looked round.

"Yes; it stretches away under the ruins, and some say even to the base of the cliffs; but I have never explored so far. It is not so dreadful after all, is it? Those stone recesses hold the coffins, and every one has a grated iron door to it. Many of my ancestors' bones are crumbling away behind those bars, poor old fellows."

"Are all those the graves, or whatever you call them, of your family?" asked Lady Clara.

"Oh no. This was the burial-place of the old monks of Trefusis. The abbey was a grand old place, but one of my noble forefathers, more famous for might than right, wrested it from them and turned it into a dwelling for himself and his family and retainers. The Court was one of our later acquisitions, and then the abbey was suffered to fall into decay. Are you overcoming your fear?"

"Yes," said Lady Clara with a bright smile. "This is really a most curious place. I am glad I came. What

beautiful carving on that stonework. Are those the Trefusis' arms?"

"Yes, and the old motto. I wonder how many of us have acted up to the grand old words?"

They stood thoughtfully looking at the carved armorial bearings and the quaint old Latin characters, while faint gleams of light fell fitfully on both the beautiful earnest faces, and the chill and silent loneliness around was forgotten.

And as they stood they heard no footfall and saw no shadow fall across the open door, where the level sun-rays fell. With a sigh they turned and met each other's eyes, and read in each a sweeter truth than life had held for them yet. But, even as that burning glance spoke from heart to heart, the light beyond changed suddenly to utter darkness. A loud heavy crash thrilled through the echoing vaults, and the dull loud clang of the closing door fell on their startled ears. By one spontaneous impulse they both rushed forward, through the dim and shadowy space that lay between them and that bright outer world from which they were so suddenly cut off.

Sir Glynne reached the door first; it was fast closed, as he had feared.

"Good Heavens, Clara!" he exclaimed as the full terror of their situation burst upon him, "the key is outside."

She turned white as death. She did not scream, or weep, or exclaim. It all seemed so useless, and she was not a woman to waste time and strength in vain laments.

"Is there no other way? Does not the handle turn from inside?" she asked at last.

"No," said Sir Glynne hopelessly, "we are fairly trapped. I ought to have taken the key out, and then I could have unlocked the door from here. It must have fallen to of its own accord."

"What are we to do?" exclaimed Lady Clara.

"Nothing except wait till we are let out," he said ruefully. "But don't look so frightened. We are sure to be missed, and there are our horses to guide them, and they cannot help seeing the key in the lock even if old Penrith does not miss it. We must just make up our minds to bear our imprisonment with philosophy for an hour or two. Will you finish the exploring of the vaults?"

"No—oh no," cried the girl with a shudder. "Let us stay near the door—we can hear steps at all events, and shout to let them know where we are. Oh, Glynne, if they should not find us!"

In her increasing terror all formality and ceremony were forgotten. She clasped her hands on his strong young arm, while a shiver of horror ran through her trembling form. Sir Glynne clasped the little cold hands tenderly, and spoke all the cheering hopeful words he could think of.

They stood there side by side for moments which seemed like hours. The flickering light that gleamed through the loopholes in the vaulted roof grew fainter and feebler. They could not see the darkening sky without, that spread like a pall over the gloomy landscape, but they heard the sough of the rising wind and the plash of falling rain-drops, few at first, then faster, and quicker till a ringing peal of thunder seemed to rend the sky, and the dismal vaults reverberated with its roar. Sir Glynne grew seriously uneasy then.

If a storm came on, the rest of the party would only think of hastening home, imagining that he and Lady Clara had turned back. In that case no one would miss them till dinner-time. He took out his watch; it was a repeater, and as he touched the spring it struck five. Two hours more then lay before them to spend in this ghastly place—two hours before anyone would feel uneasy, or think of any search. He did not tell his fears to Lady Clara, and the gathering darkness hid his troubled face from her sight. He bent down to her at last. "Let me see if I can find you a seat," he said gently; "you will be so tired standing."

She recoiled involuntarily. "Oh no," she said, shuddering; "I would rather stand."

He read her fears plainly enough and did not press the subject. Meanwhile they could hear the storm rising and bursting forth in fresh fury, lashing the tree tops, adding to the thunder of the waves, crashing in peals over the desolate ruins, and echoing and re-echoing through their dread and gloomy prison.

"At all events we are better here than if we were outside," said Sir Glynne cheerfully, in a pause of that terrible warfare.

"Better!" almost sobbed the frightened girl. "Oh,

Glynne, I would face the worst storm that ever raged only to be out of this dreadful place ! ”

Tenderly and calmly he strove to reassure her as she leant against him there, trembling like a child in the extremity of a dread against which she could not fight. Darker grew the gloom within the silent vaults ; louder and fiercer pealed the storm that waged its dreadful warfare on the world without ; but hour after hour passed on, and neither step nor voice, nor hope of human assistance, came to those two weary watchers.

No wonder Lady Clara grew numbed with fear as the dark slow hours crept on, and in that lonesome burial-place the dead and the living were shut in close companionship. No wonder that her brain reeled beneath the terrors her vivid fancy conjured up as the night drew on, and every hour that passed struck afresh its knell of terror to her fainting heart. She made no cry, she only clung silently, despairingly to Glynne, while the air seemed full of weird and terrible sounds, and fantastic faces looked at her from out those prisons of the dead, and the sigh of the wind beyond as it rustled the waving branches seemed to pierce her brain and mock her with the near close presence of that outer world from which she was so terribly far removed.

At last weariness, exhaustion, and terror took effect upon her aching brain, and cheered and soothed by her young lover's words of comfort, she fell asleep like a tired child, and in her dreams forgot the very fears that had wrought them.

Meantime, while the storm was at its height, a dripping terrified group rode back to Clydesmore. Jack Conyers dismounted first, and took from his companion's arms a helpless burden, seemingly without life or sense, and bore her gently and tenderly into the hall.

“ We found her in the woods,” he said to the frightened servants ; “ I fear she has been struck by the lightning. Take her to her room, and tell your mistress.”

In a moment all was consternation. Lady Trefusis and her housekeeper were shut in with the senseless girl ; the young men, after changing their wet clothes, loitered gloomily in the deserted drawing-room, marvelling why Sir Glynne and Lady Clara had not returned, and anxiously impatient for news of the unfortunate Irene. It was long

before the doctor arrived, and then his report of the girl's condition was very alarming.

"Her sight is quite gone," he said; "and the shock has been so severe that the brain will not soon rally from it."

Lady Trefusis was deeply distressed, and poor Jack Conyers, who had been hopelessly in love with the beautiful Italian girl from the first moment he had set eyes on her, was so upset by the announcement that he retired to his own room, unable to bear Captain D'Arcy's commiserating remarks, or the sympathising looks of the kindly old dowager.

It was not till the dressing-bell rang that Lady Trefusis remembered her son's long absence, and enquired of Captain D'Arcy as to its cause.

The young officer was unable to tell her anything. They had missed Sir Glynne and Lady Clara during the ride, and had waited for some time, expecting them to rejoin the party. They had all dismounted and strolled about, and Miss Castroni had very unkindly given them the slip. While searching for her the storm had come on, and they mounted their horses again and rode back by the path they had come.

It was while galloping through the woods that they had seen Irene's horse rushing along riderless. They had feared some accident, and after a long search, discovered the girl lying face downwards, beneath a massive oak, one side of which was black and charred by the blasting stroke of the lightning. They had borne her home with all possible speed, and thought no more of Sir Glynne or his companion till now.

Lady Trefusis listened silently to all this, standing by the bright wood fire in the hall, and with a strange and nameless fear growing in her heart at each word.

"Surely nothing could have happened to them?" she said anxiously.

And the two young men looked at her white face and then at each other, and could only echo her words, "Surely not!"

But the dinner-hour came and went, and the meal was ordered back, for none of the three could face the ordeal of that long and stately meal, and the time passed on and evening deepened into night, and still the wanderers never appeared. At last, close upon nine o'clock, one of the

stablemen sent word up to the house that Sir Glynne's horse, Erl King, and Lady Clara's mare, Firefly, had come home riderless.

Captain D'Arcy rushed down to the stables immediately, begging his friend to stay and comfort Lady Trefusis.

"You see, sir," said the man as he pointed to the two panting horses, "they've both been frightened like wi' the storm, for they never could abear thunder."

"Do you think they have thrown their riders, then?" asked D'Arcy, bewildered.

"Thrown 'em—bless your heart, no. Sir Glynne never lost seat yet, I'll be bound; and the King's like a lamb wi' him, and the mare's just as good. It's more like the young lady got off for summat, and Sir Glynne too, and then the hosses have just walked off o' theirselves, and found their way here. I expect the thunder frightened 'em, and they just ran straight to their stables."

"But the storm was over a long time ago," argued D'Arcy.

"True eno'," said the man, scratching his head in perplexity. "Well, they can't go for to speak, so we don't know how long they've bin a making their minds up to come home, do we?"

"I should say search had better be made at once," said the young man anxiously. "Supposing one of them has been thrown, or some accident has happened? Get a horse ready for me at once, and two or three of you fellows had better come too, and bring lanterns with you. I know the way we went this afternoon, and I can guide you to where I lost sight of them."

And while the party scoured the woods in all directions—save just that one spot—and while the white-haired mother, her face blanched to the hue of death, kept her agonised watch through the long, dark, silent hours, the housekeeper, who was tending the senseless girl, turned over with careless hands an old rusty key she had taken from the bosom of the girl's habit.

"I wonder what that belongs to?" she said to herself, and then laid it carelessly down on the pretty dainty toilet table, where a score of elegant trifles were scattered.

The senseless rusty iron could not speak, and there was nothing else to tell that tale of cruelty and revenge to which it held the clue.

With the dawn the tired explorers came back as they had gone, with no news to give the waiting mother, but with a deeper hopelessness on each face than it had worn when they set out on their quest. And Irene still lay on her couch, a fretful moan the only sign of life she gave, the light of fever in her wild and sightless eyes, the flush of fever on her burning cheek; and still the key lay there, and still the hours passed on, and in despairing dread and bewilderment the household watched and waited, and counselled and advised, and still there came the same old story back, "No news, no news;" and the agony of staying in the dreary house grew unbearable, and the agony of fruitless journeys was worse still; and when at sunset they were once more grouped together round the fire, it would be hard to say which face looked most hopeless.

It was just as they all stood there, the firelight shining on each white sad face, that the door opened to admit a weak, tottering old man, who came straight up to Lady Trefusis and laid his shaking hands upon her chair.

"Your pardon, my lady," he said, and his dazed eyes were turned from her wondering face, "but the key's gone."

"The key? What key?" asked Lady Trefusis in a stupefied voice.

"The key of the vaults, my lady—the key my old master put in my hands these thirty years ago—the key that I have guarded, and watched, and kept there where only I and Sir Glynne knew of. It's gone, my lady—gone!"

"What does he mean?" asked Lady Trefusis helplessly.

"What key was this you speak of?"

"The key of the vaults, my lady," said the old man, trembling more. "I'm only old Penrith, eighty-six years come Martinmas, and it was my pride and my trust, and now it's gone, and only Sir Glynne knows where I keep it. I've walked all these many miles, my lady, to ask him if he took it for a trick to frighten the poor old man, for I'm eighty-six, and it's all I'm good for, and Sir Glynne promised I should take care of it so long as I lived, and never has it left its place through all these years since he and I have known of it. Oh, my lady, let me see him—let me see him!"

He was trembling like a child, and the tears were rolling down his cheeks in the earnestness of his appeal.

Captain D'Arcy sprang impulsively forward.

"Only you and Sir Glynne know of it?" he said eagerly. "Then Sir Glynne must have it. Do you not know he is missing—has been missing since yesterday at this time? Good Heavens!" he suddenly exclaimed, and his bronzed face grew pale as death, "can they be in the vaults?"

"What on earth should they do there?" cried Jack Conyers. "Besides, if Sir Glynne had the key to get in, he could also get out, couldn't he?"

"True," said his cousin, somewhat crestfallen.

But Lady Trefusis rose with trembling limbs, and caught the old man's arm.

"What was the key like?" she asked breathlessly. "Should you know it if you saw it?"

"Know it," echoed the patriarch, "and after thirty years? Oh, Lord! I'm but a poor old man of eighty-six, but that key I should know if I was in my coffin."

Without another word Lady Trefusis hurried from the room to the chamber of Irene Castroni. On the table, amidst the glittering glass and fragile ornaments and trifles of lace and muslin, lay still that ugly strange-looking key. She had not noticed it particularly when the housekeeper had spoken to her of it the previous night, but now—what a revelation it seemed to convey! What a tragedy of horror and guilt lay upon its rusty surface. She only gave one glance at the bed—a glance of horror, almost of hatred—and then hurried away once more to the fire-lit hall.

"My God!" she cried breathlessly, as she clasped the instrument of this long torture to her breast. "If she had died, and we had not known!"

The horror of that thought was almost more than she could bear.

"Is this it?" she cried, as she thrust it into the old man's hands; and as his cry of rapture echoed in her ears, the whole dreadful truth seemed to sweep over her mind, and, with a low, terrified cry, she sank back into the friendly arms outstretched to receive her, with sense and memory wrapped in a long and blissful unconsciousness.

Is there need to tell of the flying feet and eager haste that followed; of the swift and breathless ride through the silent woods, that startled the deer among the fern and sent away the frightened birds in flocks to seek for deeper solitude? When the dying light was fading in the west,

they reached at last the scene of that revengeful act for which Irene Castroni paid the penalty of sight and reason. Thinking to punish her rival only, she had locked her within that ghostly place, and given her to terrors which might have ended the life or turned the brain of stronger beings than a weak and timid girl. Seeing only Clara's horse, she had not given any thought to the possibility of Sir Glynne being with her, but had unloosed the bridle and set the animal free to go where it chose. The fearful retribution which followed on her cowardly action prevented her from making any reparation, and but for the old man's discovery of the loss of his key, no one would have known where the missing pair had gone, or thought of searching for them in that drear and lonely place.

The terrible ordeal of those long dark hours, when hope had gradually forsaken them, and weakness and terror had robbed them of strength to re-utter their sad vain cries for help, had left its mark upon both Sir Glynne and Lady Clara; and two cold shivering figures crept out from the dreary vaults, reeling beneath the joyous sight of the sunshine and the sweet fresh kiss of the air. Lady Clara had time to rest in Penrith's room, and drink the warm restoratives prepared so lovingly for her, before the carriage came; but when she found herself safe within its kindly shelter the tears rushed in glad relief to her aching eyes, and hiding her face on Glynne's shoulder she sobbed out her thanks for the gentle manly care which had been hers throughout that fearful vigil, and to which she owed both life and reason.

"How can I ever repay—how can I ever thank you?" she murmured again and again; and he, folding the little trembling figure to his heart, whispered softly and tenderly how she might do both.

Sir Glynne must have found proposing a less dreadful ordeal than he had anticipated, or he had apparently quite forgotten his promise to his mother. In any case, when she, weeping and radiant, held her recovered treasure in her arms once more, sobbing out, "My son! Oh, thank God for this!" he drew another figure forward into that fond embrace, saying gently:

"And your daughter, dear mother? Thank God also for her!"

The Spectre.

CHAPTER I.

WE always called him "The Spectre."

He was so ugly and ungainly, such a hopelessly wretched-looking being. His lean, cadaverous face, and deep-sunken eyes and lank coarse black hair, made up altogether such a fearful and wonderful spectacle of ugliness, that that nickname seemed just the most suitable thing in the world for him, and no one who once heard it applied ever forgot to use it again.

I remember that I, Hilary St. George, once very nearly disgraced myself by letting out the *sobriquet* to his face, but I recollected myself in time, and stammered out something else, with a very scarlet countenance and an appearance of confusion which roused his curiosity; for having known him from childhood, and having long since discovered too how noble and unselfish a character was concealed by that uncomely exterior, I and he had become great friends, and though my brothers and sisters ridiculed him unmercifully, and tormented me only too often for my fidelity, yet I never swerved from it, and I always maintained that, after all, beauty did not signify so much in a man "if he was only nice."

And was the Spectre nice? I thought so. In the days of my youth I owed many a summer holiday, many a ride, drive, picnic, dance, or enjoyment to the intercession and thoughtfulness of Dick Knollys (his real name). Nor was this all. He loved to load me with presents. He never forgot to bring me toys, books, sweetmeats, flowers—anything that he thought would please or amuse me—when he returned from his rare visits to London. His appearance at our quiet home on those occasions was always hailed with delight, by me at least; and, indeed, I should have been ungrateful had it been otherwise, for all my wants and wishes were remembered and gratified in the most lavish manner and no remonstrance from my father or mother

sufficed to stay his generous offerings, being only met with the entreaty: "Do let me give the child some pleasure. It is a kindness to myself."

I often wondered why he was so ugly—poor ungainly Dick! He came from a good-looking stock, and his father had been extremely handsome. His mother died at his birth, and that fact, coupled with his son's ill-favoured appearance, perhaps accounted for old Sir Richard Knollys' aversion to that son. In any case, the boy was lonely, neglected, and unloved, and but for my gentle mother's pity and my father's sympathy and interest, he might have grown up to manhood soured, embittered, hardened, ready to curse the fate whose cruel irony had showered upon him every worldly advantage, and yet left him a pariah among his kind.

He was years older than myself, and when he was twenty-eight his father died suddenly, and he came into the finest property in the county.

I used to hear people discuss his good fortune, coupled with expressions of pity for himself. He was so shy, so awkward, so ugly. What a misfortune it was that the family honours had descended to such an unworthy representative! At that time I took his part warmly; but I was his only champion, and as I grew older and won admiration for myself and had lovers suing for my favours, I pitied him more deeply. Poor Spectre!

He led a very lonely life. His books were his only companions. He made no friends and sought no society. He had travelled a good deal; but that was before he became master of the Hall. Since then he had remained at home, doing a great deal of good in a quiet, unostentatious way, but never popular or a favourite, despite all his goodness and generosity.

My father was a doctor, with a large family, and an income not adequately proportioned to their requirements. He had the best practice of Monkford, and we lived a little way out of the village, about a mile from the Hall. We were a healthy, noisy, boisterous family, consisting of four girls and three boys, and lived just the homely, cheerful country lives that our neighbours did, finding existence perhaps a trifle monotonous, but on the whole a very pleasant and estimable thing.

About the time of which I write, my eldest brother,

Graham, was in London walking the hospitals ; the second, Jack, at a boarding-school in Wales ; and the youngest, Tom, at home, studying with a tutor, whose duties also consisted in imparting as much classic and other lore to my sisters and self as we could be induced to receive. I don't think it was very much.

One day—it was in June, I remember—we were all thrown into a great state of excitement by the sudden suggestion of Dick Knollys' (we never called him Sir Richard) that he would like to organise a picnic if we would do the inviting. All the other preparations, such as conveyances, food, wines, he would undertake with the assistance of his housekeeper. That we were all startled by so unusual a suggestion, I need hardly say. To me, however, it gave unlimited satisfaction, and I seconded Dick's proposal with all my usual enthusiasm. The place was agreed upon without much trouble—a lovely romantic little glen called the Gipsy's Wood, some six or seven miles from Monkford—and my sisters promised to make up as large and merry a party as possible. We talked it over with mother after Dick had left, and soon won her cordial sympathy and co-operation.

"The worst of it is," I remarked, when mother had progressed so far—"the worst of it is, we are so badly off for men. I wish we could import a few new ones. Our dances and tennis-parties are slow in the extreme. We all know beforehand what a poor contingent of the noble sex will turn up, and to whom each of them individually will devote himself. There are too many girls in Monkford, I must say."

"Or too few men—which?" laughed Hester, my eldest sister, a fair, plump, rosy damsel of two-and twenty years.

"Both, I suppose," I answered. "It is really becoming very serious."

"Hilary, like Alexander, is sighing for other worlds to conquer," observed Tom from the verandah—we girls were all on the lawn under the shade of the great cedar-trees.

"You are very rude, Tom." I answered majestically. "I was not thinking of myself at all."

"Oh, no, it was your disinterested feeling for your fellow-sufferers of course," was the provoking rejoinder. "Come, Hil, don't look injured innocence at me; it doesn't pay. I'm not to be taken in."

"Tom, Tom!" remonstrated mother gently. "My dear, you must not talk in such a way to your sister."

"Pooh! she doesn't mind," answered Tom the incorrigible. "Or if she does, I don't. Besides, it's quite true she's an awful little flirt, and every fellow in Monkford is her bond-slave—more fools they!—and yet that's not enough for her! Oh, woman, woman, thy name is——"

"Do be quiet, Tom," I interrupted pettishly. "You talk great nonsense. I'm sure it's time you were at your Greek too, for I saw Mr. Ross go into the study while the—I mean while Dick was here."

"Why don't you come out with his name as you used to do?" asked Tom, ignoring my well-meant endeavours to secure his absence. "You never call him 'The Spectre' now, yet you were the first to give him the name!"

"Hilary is quite right," interposed my mother. "It is not fair to say behind one's back what you would not say to one's face. And it is not kind to mock at physical infirmities or imperfections. There is nothing for which we are more entirely unaccountable, or more helpless to remedy. Mere beauty or ugliness are the last things for which men and women individually are responsible, and yet I suppose they do more to win or banish love than any other attribute of nature."

"It does seem unjust," I answered musingly, "but it is certainly the case. Ugliness revolts and beauty charms; the one wins without effort what the other may strive and labour for in vain."

"There is a case in point with poor Richard Knollys," continued my mother; "from his very babyhood he was an alien to love and affection. That he regards himself now with morbid horror I can plainly perceive, and yet he has a truer heart, a nobler nature, than doubtless many a handsomer face carries. There is no one I pity as sincerely as I do him."

"Yes, he is a very good fellow," said Tom patronisingly, as he lounged off in the direction of the study at last. "But, oh! he is so ugly!"

"I don't think Dick so very ugly," I said meditatively. "He has such kind, honest eyes, and his voice is beautiful. I never heard anything so musical despite its ring of sadness, and——"

I stopped abruptly; the colour rushed to my face,

dyeing it scarlet with confusion. By my side was the object of my vindication, and in the eyes I had praised was a light of such fervent gratitude, such worshipping, overwhelming devotion, that it needed no words to tell me the secret of that lonely, unloved life.

"I—I did not hear you coming," I stammered. "What has brought you back so quickly?"

"This," he said, pointing to a letter in his hand, and speaking with evident effort. "I met the postman on my way and he gave it me. I thought you might like to know my cousin Charlton, whom I have so often spoken of, has at last returned from abroad, and is coming to stay with me. I thought we could invite him to the picnic."

"Oh—of course," we chorussed. "How nice! How fortunate that he should come just now! When will he arrive?"

"To-morrow," answered Dick, his eyes still seeking mine, which in unconquerable embarrassment I studiously averted.

"To-morrow!" chirped Hester and Nellie. "Oh! do bring him over when he comes, will you? We were just lamenting the absence, or rather scarcity, of young men in this part of the world. Your cousin will be quite a godsend."

"And so, after all"—Tom's voice echoed from the open window beyond—"and so, after all, Alexander will have another world to conquer."

But, happily, Dick did not understand his meaning.

CHAPTER II.

TRUE to his word, the next afternoon Dick brought his cousin round to see us.

It was five o'clock, and we were all sitting under the cedar-trees at tea and strawberries, when the two figures became visible and raised a little flutter of expectation in our maidenly bosoms.

"Phew!" whistled Tom the incorrigible, as they drew nearer and nearer, the golden sunrays streaming on the dark hair and tall soldierly figure of the stranger; "look on this picture—and on that! Hyperion to a saytr. By Jove! Hilary, did you ever see such a contrast!"

He might well say it. No greater or more striking contrast could have been presented than that offered by the two cousins. No wonder poor Dick shrank back and looked even more hopelessly awkward and ugly than usual. Charlton Knollys was, without doubt, the handsomest man I had ever seen or imagined. He was tall and well-made, his face dark, but the clear skin had the beautiful flush of a girl's, and every feature was moulded to perfection. But the eyes held the greatest charm—dark in colour, soft as velvet, they were full of power and fascination. The lashes that shaded them were long and sweeping, and made them at times look even darker than they were. The mouth, too, was small and beautifully formed, and neither on man's or woman's lips have I ever seen a smile so wonderfully sweet and winning as Charlton's.

Charlton! how easily I write that name; how quickly I seemed to learn it!

As I met his glance and touched his hand, I knew that for once all my own weapons had deserted me. It was no longer I who wanted worlds to conquer, as Tom had laughingly said; from the moment I saw Charlton Knollys I was subjugated myself.

I don't suppose anyone at that merry tea-table noticed much difference in me. I talked, and laughed, and poured out tea, and handed strawberries, and behaved much as usual, but all the time my ears were strained to catch the faintest syllable of that musical voice; all the time I seemed taking in the changes of the face, the wonderful expressions of the soft, dark, speaking eyes—eyes that did indeed, “look my heart away” without an effort at resistance from myself.

Up to that hour I had been a wild, free, careless girl—after it, I knew I should never be the same again. We hardly spoke; we hardly looked at each other; and yet, how well I seemed to know him! They lingered on and on till the stars were out in the sweet June sky and the dew was falling on the grass on which we trod. He and I—it had come to that—he and I moving side by side; he and I together—the world a paradise—all else forgotten, or of no account.

I have never forgotten that night; I never shall forget it. They left at last, and his hand-touch lingered in mine, and his voice echoed in my ear very long after his last

"Good-night" had been said, and, like one in a dream, I went up to my own little room and looked out at the quiet night, until the dawn swept all its shadows away into glory, and a bird in the cedar-boughs woke and sang its morning hymn, while the cool sweet air ruffled its soft feathers and stirred the dewy leaves, and swept across my brow with caressing touch, and aroused me from my dream at last, and brought back memory and common sense once more. But I knew I was not the same Hilary St. George who for eighteen years had lived, and laughed, and enjoyed the brief sweet days of youth beneath the shadow of those hills over which the dawn was breaking now: and while the sun rose higher in the lightening sky, and the birds' song grew more glad and gay amidst the glistening cedar-boughs, I lay down in my little white bed and buried my flushed cheeks in the pillows, and tears came rushing in a hot swift throng to the hidden eyes, though I could not say why I wept or what I desired.

I knew—only too soon!

There were no shadows now upon the hills. The day was perfect, and it was the day appointed for our expedition to Gipsy Wood, and I was in one flutter of inward excitement respecting it.

We were a large party—fourteen of the noble sex and some sixteen or eighteen ladies—mostly young. The carriages had been ordered for eleven, there was to be a wagonette from the Hall for the servants and comestibles, and some of our party were to go on horseback. On the whole, we made a goodly cavalcade when assembled, and so many pretty toilettes and pretty faces ought to have created considerable havoc among the eligible young men of Monkford. Ought—I do not say that it did. I fancy, in this prosaic nineteenth century, that female beauty needs something substantial in the way of worldly possessions to assist its charms; in any case, the young men of Monkford were "more backward in coming forward" than necessity demanded, and seemed peculiarly insensible to the charms of a dual existence such as was temptingly offered to them by the numerous spinsters, who were ready and willing enough to be converted to the order of holy matrimony had they so willed it; only, somehow, in many cases, "Barkis wasn't willing."

As for me, that day was a red-letter one in my simple calendar. To be with him, near him, to hear his voice, to watch the changes of the mobile face—all this was more than enough to content me. We roamed through the woods, and it made me strangely happy to find him by my side of his own choice. We stood by the river as it lay like a sheet of sunlight in the hot rays of the June sun. He gathered the wild roses from the hedgegrows, and honeysuckle from the great coiled swinging branches where it had long twined undisturbed; with light words and happy laughter, and sweet gay converse that had just at intervals some soft sudden pause or eloquent look to make it different from all other converse, so we passed our time; I drinking deep draughts of a new and intoxicating happiness; my heart, rich in youth's sweet faith and wrapped in the dreamful bliss of a love as yet unawakened from its slumbers, as yet only half conscious of its own ideal.

We had wandered far away from the others; the golden river was close beside our feet; here and there a water-bird flew out of the tall rushes that fringed its banks, waking the solitude with its startled cry or the whirr of its rapid flight. We were both silent now. I felt shy and troubled, and stealing a glance at the face beside me I saw that it looked strangely grave, almost sad. As I dropped my glance in some confusion at meeting his own, a shadow crossed our path. I looked up, and saw standing just before us, a woman. With one rapid look which seemed to take in her wonderful loveliness with a surprise not un-mixed with pain, I paused and glanced at my companion. In his face was a light of recognition, of joy, welcome—all in one, that seemed to turn me cold and sick as I read it. She stood in the sunshine and drew its light and life about her like a warm and living picture, the snow-white hue of her floating dress enhancing the rich ripe glow of cheeks and lips, the wonderful colouring of her hair and eyes. As my companion bowed low before her I saw the dazzling smile she gave, the flush and beauty of its welcome. I heard their murmured words, and was conscious that he was introducing me to her—that her name was Miss Flora Damian—but I could find no words, and felt only hopelessly stupid and awkward in that radiant presence. Presently, when my scattered thoughts grew calm, I heard what they were saying. Every word seemed a death-

knell to the fond, foolish hopes I had been so long indulging.

"And you are actually staying here in the neighbourhood?" said Charlton Knollys pleasantly.

"Yes, with my aunt, Mrs. Jardine; she lives just over there. You can see the house from the outskirts of the wood. Such a queer dilapidated old place it is. They call it Heron's Roost. I never saw a house like it."

"And why are you straying 'so lone and lovely in this bleak way'?" quoted Charlton, laughing. "Are you not afraid of poachers, or gipsies, or marauders of that description?"

"No," she said, quietly, "I am not afraid of anything."

Our eyes met as she said these words. Was it only my fancy, or did they really wear that cold, defiant, glittering look I thought I saw? It was so brief—in a second it was gone, a smile broke the firm-set lips into tender curves, a soft light glowed in the dark-blue eyes, over which the curling lashes threw so deep a shade that sometimes they looked almost black.

"I am taking you out of your way I fear," she said, for we were all advancing together now. "Pray do not let me do that. Your party will be wondering what has become of you."

If this speech was intended to remind me of any seeming impropriety on my own part, it succeeded well. I blushed crimson and came to an abrupt stand.

"I think you are right," I said. "I, at least, ought to return."

"Then you cannot come and see the house?" she said appealingly, as she turned to Charlton. "I wanted to show you the quickest way to come if ever you honour us with a visit."

"Which you may be quite sure I shall soon do," he said politely, but not so warmly as I should have expected. "Thank you, I cannot avail myself of your offer at present, but I shall soon find the way to Heron's Roost, you may depend."

"Pray do not let me prevent you from accompanying Miss Damian," I interposed proudly. "I can find my way back perfectly well by myself. Besides, I hear voices close at hand. Some more of our party are doubtless there in the woods."

"Oh well, if you don't mind——" began Miss Damian.

"Not in the least, I assure you," I said coolly, and with a slight bow I left them both, so putting an end to Charlton's evident indecision by deciding for him.

I walked away quietly and slowly, knowing that two pairs of eyes were watching me, and resolved to show a brave front despite the hurt I suffered. But when the winding path had shut them out from sight I hurried on with quicker steps and eyes too blind with tears to even see the way I trod. I felt the brambles catch my dress and the brushwood cling about my feet, but the pain at heart was goading me on to desperation. and I heeded nothing else. At last a cry escaped my lips and brought me a little to my senses; in pushing my way through the wild thicket I had caught my sleeve in a thorn-bush, and wrenching it hurriedly away tore not only the loose thin muslin but the flesh as well. The blood gushed out, turning me sick and faint at sight of it. In an instant my sleeve was soaked with the crimson stains, and the cry that left me was echoed by another. Looking hastily up, I saw the Spectre! He rushed forward and was by my side in an instant.

"Oh Dick, look what I've done!" I cried piteously, as I held up my bleeding arm.

He snatched out his pocket-handkerchief and wiped away the blood, and bound it up so tenderly that I wondered how his great hands could possess such gentleness.

"Does it pain you very much?" he asked, looking at my pale tear-stained face with untold love in his own.

"Not—very," I said heroically.

"I am sure it does," he said; and then, without word or warning, he seized the wounded member and covered it with passionate kisses. I snatched it away in a rage. The soft white flesh seemed to burn and throb beneath the shame of those fiery caresses. I felt furious at his audacity.

"Are you mad, Dick?" I cried, trembling with rage and indignation. "How dare you?"

"Yes, I am mad!" he cried wildly, as he threw himself at my feet and buried his face in the folds of my dress. "Mad for love of you, Hilary. Mad for want of a word or smile from the lips, that are kind to all others save

only the hopeless wretch whose paradise your presence makes!"

I stood petrified with amazement as I heard those wild words. Dick—Dick Knollys to talk to me like this! It seemed too preposterous for belief.

"Oh, pray get up!" I said at last, when I could find words for my astonishment. "I am very sorry, Dick. I hope you do not mean all you say. I always looked upon you as a brother. I—I had no idea you cared for me in any other way."

He rose to his feet, and by a strong effort seemed to regain his composure.

"Had you not?" he said simply. "I suppose I hid it better than I thought. Oh Hilary, from my very boyhood I have loved and idolized you. You have been the one thing that has kept life in me, or made my existence bearable. I—do—not think it possible you can care for me; what woman could?" he added bitterly. "But oh, I love you so; you should not have a want or wish ungratified! You have told me often of your desire to travel; you should visit all the countries of the world, did you so choose. You have lamented to me your inability to carry out schemes of usefulness for the benefit of others; you may play Lady Bountiful to the whole county. You—but why do I say such things? it is an insult to bribe you thus! Oh, Hilary, do you hate me? Don't turn away so coldly. If you only knew what it was to love as I love, you would have some grain of pity left for me!"

Oh, did I not know? I think I did then if never before. But I said nothing—what could I say?

"I thought you cared for me a little once," he said sadly. "But since Charlton came I noticed how you changed. Oh, my darling, don't think of him if you value happiness. He can never be anything to you or any other woman save—one!"

"You—I do not—understand you!" I gasped, leaning feebly back against the great tree trunk behind me as I spoke. "Why do you tell me this? Your cousin is nothing to me."

"I am glad to hear it," he said, looking away from my tell-tale face as if in pity for its self-betrayal. "I have thought often it was not right of him to pay you so much

attention as he has done. It might mislead you ; and he is not—free.”

I turned aside, sick at heart and wounded to the very soul by those words, and all they showed me of my own weakness and blindness. With a violent effort I stifled my feelings and calmed my voice sufficiently to answer him.

“You need not bring your cousin’s name into this discussion ?” I said again. “He is nothing to me.”

“Thank Heaven !” he said softly.

I turned sharply upon him. “Why do you say that ?” I demanded. “It makes no difference as far as you are concerned !”

“You can never care for me, then, Hilary ?” he faltered brokenly.

“No !” I said curtly ; for the cruel pain at my heart made me heedless of the suffering I inflicted, and callous to the agony he could not hide.

“Never !” he said ; and the anguish in his eyes frightened me as I saw it. “Oh, Heaven ! how can I bear my life now ?” And, with a look of despair on his face, he turned aside, and the crashing echoes of the brushwood as his footsteps died away, and the soft cambric that he had bound round my wounded arm, were the only things reminding me that this strange interview had not been some unpleasant dream, or fervid fancy of my brain.

CHAPTER III.

WHEN I reached the place where we were to have a gipsy tea, I found the whole party assembled with the exception of Dick Knollys. His cousin was lounging moodily under the shadow of a great beech, but I saw how quickly he noticed my return and how swiftly he came to my side when wondering exclamations as to my pale face and bandaged arm drew the attentions of the others to me. I gave a hurried explanation of my accident, and, keeping studiously away from Charlton and ignoring his tender sympathy, I busied myself in assisting with the preparation of tea. The time went on, and the merry meal was long over, and the carriages were assembling for our return, and still there were no signs of Dick. Everyone began to wonder and conjecture what had become of him, and at last, wearied with

waiting, we set out for home, two of the men-servants from the Hall being left to await their master, or search for him in case of his continued absence.

"It's absurd to think he can be lost though," said Charlton Knollys. "He knows every inch of the country for miles round; he must have strayed too far and forgotten the time."

I don't know how it came about, but in the bustle and confusion of getting everyone comfortably settled, and seeing the elder members of the party protected against damp and night air, and the younger ones by her or his special cavalier, I was among the last to be disposed of, and then to my confusion discovered that the only vehicle left for me was the little low pony-trap which Charlton Knollys had driven over in the morning. He came up as I stood flushed and hesitating there.

"You will let me drive you, will you not, Miss St. George?" he asked. I stammered an assent. What else could I do?

The moon was up and the white road stretched before us, swept here and there into softer shadows by the arching boughs. All was so quiet, so still, so unutterably peaceful and beautiful, that I grew calm and quiet too, and the passionate fever seemed to leave my heart, and the hot anger no longer stirred my pulses as I thought of the treachery of the man beside me. He was very quiet too. His face looked stern and troubled—the face of one perplexed by doubts of himself or his own wisdom. At last he said very quietly:

"I should like to ask you something, Miss St. George. Would you think a man very weak whose heart seemed to hold two loves; who was penetrated by the sweetness and beauty of one woman, and almost bound in honour to return the openly-avowed inclination of another? If you further add to these perplexities that poverty prevents his wooing where inclination leads, and that he fears to do the girl he loves a greater wrong by speaking than by silence, would you blame or pity him most?"

I felt my cheeks flush with shame. Had he then penetrated my secret? Did he think so meanly of me that he could thus hint at such knowledge? Calming my voice till its coldness surprised myself, I answered coolly: "Women judge of these matters differently to men, Mr. Knollys, so

that it is useless to ask my advice. A man should know his own mind, and not hesitate between duty and inclination a single moment."

"Then to which would you give the preference?" he asked.

"To duty, of course," I answered sternly.

"But duty is so hard and inclination so tempting," he said, softly, looking down into my eyes with all the dangerous fascination of his own.

"That is no matter."

"You think not? Well, I asked your opinion. I wonder if you expect me to abide by it?"

"Your conduct in no way interests me, Mr. Knollys."

"No? I thought it might—a little," he said with evident disappointment. "Are you a student of character, Miss Hilary? I used to think you were. Will you tell me what you think of Flora Damian?"

"She is very beautiful," I said curtly.

"Pshaw! that is nothing. So is a picture, so are plenty of women. I am sick and sated with mere physical perfection. Should you think she would make a man happy if he gave his heart into her keeping? Could you read her soul through the windows of her eyes?"

"I should never dream of trying," I said restlessly, feeling angry and hurt that he should consult with me over the perfections of his future wife. "That is an occupation suitable only for the man who, as you say, gives his heart into her keeping. Of course, a beautiful face is always an index to a beautiful soul."

"Not always," he answered gravely.

"I know little of life or the world; I can only speak as I myself think or feel. I have no doubt Miss Damian is as perfect in mind as she is in body. I daresay she will make you very happy."

"Me? I should never ask her to do so!" he said hotly.

"No?" I questioned coolly. "Perhaps you are so sure of her ability to do so, it needs no asking; you espouse a certainty, and with good cause."

"What do you mean, Hilary?"

"I am not aware that the terms on which our acquaintanceship is based give you your cousin's privilege of calling me by my christian-name, Mr. Knollys."

"You are the most provoking little being," he said, half

vexed, half laughing. "'A rosebud set about with little wilful thorns' is your best description. Why can you not look upon me as a cousin too? Would it be very hard?"

The dangerous softness in his voice, the look in his eyes, drove me nearly mad with anger and pain and indignation. How dared the man treat me like this, I asked myself? Did he think I was to be won so easily? I would show him his mistake soon enough.

"I don't know," I said, curbing my rebellious voice into its coldest, haughtiest accents. "I will tell you when I *am* your cousin."

He drew back, startled out of his usual self-control.

"Do you mean that?" he said hoarsely, hurriedly. "I know Dick loves you. I—I—did not think you cared for him!"

"Does one always wear one's heart on one's sleeve?" I said coldly.

"Permit me to congratulate you," he answered, disregarding my question. "The Hall will have a charming mistress, and Dick is a thoroughly good fellow in the opinion of those who, like yourself, can look below the surface."

I was silent. Shame, anger, pride were wavering in my heart. What had I done? What had I led him to believe in order to hide my real feelings from his sight? Speak I could not, nor did he strive to make me now. He drove along in silence, while the shadows quivered on the moon-lit road and the stars looked down upon my shame-flushed face, whose very fever dried the tears that fell from my downcast eyes.

Suddenly the horse shied; some shadow, I fancied, had startled him; and in a second the reins were wrenched from the careless hands of his driver, and we were tearing along the road at racing speed!

"Sit still, for God's sake!" cried Charlton, as a low cry of terror escaped my lips.

He had secured the reins again, but could not check the animal's speed as we flew along the road with the trees surging by in a giddy, countless mass, and all the fair night landscape turned into formless shapes and shadows.

We neither of us spoke—only he drew me nearer to his side and placed his arm around me.

"Hide your face, you will not feel so frightened then,"

he said softly. "This pace cannot last; he will tire himself out. One comfort, it is a straight road."

Even as he spoke the horse suddenly swerved aside, and dashed down a narrow lane on our right.

"Good heavens! where are we going?" said Charlton.

I raised my eyes and looked with shuddering horror at the new route.

"It is the worst road about here," I gasped faintly. "We are sure to be upset. Oh, do let me jump out. I am sure I should not be hurt."

"Don't talk such nonsense," he cried sharply. "Do you think I am not wretched enough without having your death to be answerable for?"

I was silent. I hid my eyes once more, and I knew with shame and sorrow that even my own danger and his were subservient to the intoxication of his presence, the joy that thrilled to my heart's core at the mere touch of the sheltering arm that held me still so closely to his side. But suddenly a thought rushed through me that startled me into a new and more terrible fear.

"Oh, Heaven!" I cried wildly, as I started up and looked at the narrow uneven lane, the swaying vehicle, and the mad ungovernable steed, "I had forgotten the mine. He is making straight for it!"

"The mine!" echoed Charlton in alarm. "Where—what mine?"

"It is an old tin mine, long unused, but it is very dangerous, and has never been covered," I gasped between the jerks of the vehicle and the noise of the clattering hoofs. "In five minutes we shall be there. Oh, do try to turn him aside!"

In vain. Strong man as he was, Charlton Knollys's strength was as child's play now. Faster and faster rushed on the flying steed—nearer and nearer came the fatal landmark. I could see the dark void stretching before us! I could fancy the plunge—the shriek; and then—annihilation. Had it come? for I felt the horse rear and plunge, and then I was thrown into Charlton's arms; while a voice—a voice familiar as a friend's, dear now as a saviour's—cried out entreatingly to us both to hold on. I opened my eyes then and shuddered at what I saw.

A few yards from the pit's mouth stood Dick, his powerful arms upraised, his hands grasping the bridle of the

rearing horse. I seemed to see him but for a second—his face lit and glorified by the quivering moon-rays—his whole strong stature erect and ready for the terrible struggle to come. And then, a dull thud—a crash that seemed to turn my whole heart sick and faint with its horrible dread!—and the horse stood trembling and passive beside a prostrate figure, and from my lips burst a cry of anguish unutterable.

I do not know how long it was after this that my senses came slowly back, and with them the memory of the horror I had undergone. I was safely at home. I learnt that some labourers had come to our assistance, and the horse had submitted to be driven back to my house. My first enquiry was for Dick. I was told my father had never left him since they had brought him home, and the whole house seemed to me to wear the hush and stillness of death.

Day after day passed wearily on, and still he lingered, and still no word of hope could call that lingering a sign of better things to come. I crept about the house like a ghost. I listened at the door of that silent room. I spent my days in prayers, my nights in tears, that the brave noble life might be spared; but there came a day at last when I knew such prayers were futile. He was conscious, and had asked for me. As I came and stood by his side, and saw his altered face, and caught the wistful far-off look in those dying eyes, I knew there was hope no longer. I fell beside his bed, and in a torrent of passionate weeping poured out my vain regrets—my bitter grief. He laid his hand on my bowed head—oh, gentle touch that once I had so rudely scorned!—oh, tender heart that I had so long wounded! What was not my remorse now, knowing that for my sake, and for price of my safety, he lay there in the clasp of life's dread foe!

"Do not grieve so, dear," he said feebly, as my sobs fell on his ear. "I am quite content to die. Life has not been so sweet a thing that I should fear to exchange it. Besides,"—his voice faltered, the brave true eyes grew strangely dim—"besides, my death will make all straight. Charlton will be a worthy successor, and—you—you will still reign at the Hall as its mistress, as I so hoped to see you. Hush! do not deny me that happiness. Charlton

loves you most dearly, and I think he does not love in vain. He will have no need to make a mercenary marriage now, and he was never quite engaged to Miss Damian, only his parents so wished it, but he—never. Don't cry any more, dear. Are you so sorry for me? I think it is best as it is."

Even as my tears fell on the hand I clasped, that hand grew cold within my own; the eyes that strove to smile back to my tear-blinded ones, became glazed and dim. He passed from my sight to that bourne which no human love can reach—from whence no earthly traveller has ever yet returned.

Is it best? In Dick's own gentle words I answer that question which my regretful heart has asked for many a year :

God knows !

“Consequences.”

THE CAUSE.

“If you please, I want to go to Charing Cross.”

It was such a pretty voice, and such a young, timid, childish voice, that I looked down involuntarily from my seat on the top of the omnibus, and saw a little figure, with upraised face, and pale, floating hair, and two small hands holding tight to the leading-string of a small white dog.

“All right; this is your bus; but we can’t take no dogs, miss, you know.”

Thus the conductor, rough and to the point, as is the manner of conductors, and, indeed, of most public officials.

“Oh, I can’t go without him!” cried the pretty, plaintive voice. “Please, might he go on the top?”

“I will take him,” I said, leaning down and addressing the conductor. “Let the child get in.”

She looked up gratefully at me. The gas-lamps flashed full and bright on her face. Something in the eyes, as I looked at them, struck me strangely, pitifully. They had a blank, unseeing look, giving back no response to the glance of my own.

“Good gracious!” I exclaimed. “the child is blind!”

“Yes, sir,” she answered meekly; “that is why I must take Tip with me. He leads me along, you know.”

I thought I had never seen anything so touching as the meek, upraised face, with its halo of pale-gold hair, and its solemnity of helpless appeal.

“Lift her up,” I said to the man; and in another instant the child and the dog were by my side.

It was about nine o’clock, and a dull December night. She was thinly, but neatly clad; the shabby, patched garments and dark felt hat were deftly and daintily arranged. I looked at her with a certain curiosity that soon found vent in speech.

“How comes it,” I asked, “that you are going to the Strand at this time of night, alone? Are you not afraid?”

“Oh, no,” she said readily. “Tip knows the way quite

well. I am going to meet mother. She is playing at the Coronet Theatre. I have to take her a message. She must receive it as soon as possible."

A troubled look came over the pretty, delicate face. It seemed to me that it was a look of fear, and her hands clasped the little dog closer to her side.

"Then your mother is an actress?" I said.

"Yes, sir. It is only a small part she plays to-night, but sometimes she stays till the end. She has another friend at the theatre, and they come home together. But to-night it is necessary she should be back early, for some friends have come from a long distance to see her. So they sent me to fetch her. It was so kind of you to speak to the conductor for me, sir, for I should have been late, had I not caught this 'bus."

"And were you always blind?" I asked presently.

"Oh, no," she said, and again her cheek paled and that troubled look came over her face. "I remember a time when I could see quite well. But I must not speak about it, sir; mother would be angry. They tell me that it is only a fancy of my own—perhaps it is—and that I never did see what I fancied; it was only a dream, like that terrible time before everything grew dark. Do you remember your dreams, sir?"

"Sometimes," I said, a little puzzled by her strange words. "But what can a child like you know of dark dreams, or their terrors? You should banish such gloomy fancies. You ought only to be thinking of dolls, and flowers, and skipping-ropes, and green fields, and meadows, and such-like things."

Oh, what an old, old face it was that looked back to mine, smiting me to the heart with its unchildish sorrow, making my words sound foolish as an idiot's babble!

There was nothing unsightly about those darkened eyes, only an absence of light, a steady, blank gaze, which never faltered or drooped, but thrilled one with a strange uncanny feeling, as the look in a dead face might do.

The dog nestled close to her with a little whine, and her expression changed directly. She bent over him, her lips touching his soft curls.

"Poor Tip—pretty Tip!" she murmured. "What should I do without you?"

Then again she spoke to me.

"I should not care for green fields, or flowers, or trees. I could not see them, you know. In the streets here it is all noise, and bustle, and confusion, and dirt, and poverty. Mother tells me of it, so I know. I am glad then that I cannot see, for I should feel so sorry always. I do now, sometimes, when I hear the beggars asking alms, and the little children crying for food, and the men and women cursing and fighting at the bars and doors of the gin-palaces. But, if I saw them all, I think I could not bear it. It would nearly break my heart."

It was not a child's face now; it was that old and pain-filled one again. I think my heart ached for her as it had never ached for living creature yet. But I could say nothing to her. I only sat and looked at the gas-lit streets, and listened to the hum of the busy thoroughfares, and wished it were easy to make one's fellow-creatures happier.

"You are very fond of your mother, are you not?" I said presently.

"Oh, yes," she said softly. "She is all I have, you know, except Tip; and she is so young, and, oh, so pretty! They have often told me that, but I think I know it without being told."

"And your father?" I hazarded.

"Oh, he died long ago—many years ago."

She shivered a little, and I asked if she were cold.

"Oh, no," she answered cheerfully. "Shall we soon be there, do you think?"

"Yes, very soon. We are going down Regent Street now. Shall I tell you about the shops? They look so gay and beautiful for Christmas. What shall you do with yourself to-morrow?"

"I shall have mother for the whole day," she said, her face breaking into smiles. "I do not mind about anything else. Yes, you may tell me about the shops if you will. I like to know what is in them, and fancy what I could buy for mother if I were rich. She is so fond of pretty things!"

I cannot tell how it was that her words smote me as with a sudden pang of fear—seeming, indeed, to reveal to me the frail fabric upon which this childish devotion was built. An actress—a young, pretty, frivolous creature, with expensive tastes, and small means. Little need to sketch the picture on broader lines!

I told her about the shops, only to hear afresh of the

tastes, and desires, and pretty extravagances of the mother she idolised; of the plans they built for the future, and the recklessness with which they spent the present. I was almost glad when we reached our destination, and the little childish voice ceased its innocent confidences. I helped her down. I would have paid her fare, only that she gently refused my offer, but with so proud and decided an air that I could not press the matter.

"I will walk with you to the theatre, if you will let me," I then said. "I am going up the Strand also."

"If it is not troubling you," she said in her quaint, old-fashioned way.

I assured her it was not, and that I was anxious to watch the marvellous powers and sagacity displayed by Tip, at which she laughed quite merrily.

We went on, The Strand was crowded with people, the streets thronged with vehicles.

"How could they have sent you here by yourself?" I cried involuntarily, as I just saved the slender little figure from a rough push. "Why, it was downright cruelty!"

"Oh, no," she said. "They know I am used to go about alone. No harm has ever come to me—or ever will, I think."

I could almost believe it. She looked like some fair young spirit walking the world's busy ways. Her movements were slow and tranquil. A soft calm seemed to hover around her. The delicate, pale face, the floating hair, the little thin fingers clinging to that guiding string, made a picture of purity and helplessness that could not fail to move all hearts.

I saw many eyes turn on her, many faces watching her. I did not see one that was not pitiful and compassionate.

It was close upon ten o'clock when we reached the theatre, and I took her round to the stage-door. She spoke a few words to the porter, who seemed to know her, and looked surprised, and a little troubled at her question. He went away, however, after asking us into his little den. A few moments after there came a rush of light feet, and a strange, dazzling-looking creature flashed in. She was painted and powdered, gauzy wings fluttered from her shoulders, airy draperies floated round her.

She came straight up to the child. There was a strange light in her eyes.

"Oh, Faith, Faith," she cried, "what brought you here to-night, of all nights?"

The child raised her pale, startled face.

"What has happened?" she faltered. "Mother—is she ill—has she left?"

"Yes," said the girl, turning away from the beseeching look, "she has left, long ago. Don't look so scared, child. Here's a letter she gave me for you. I was to bring it home to you to-night. She will come back—oh, of course she will come back—only not just at once. You must be patient you know, for a bit, and then——"

Her voice broke off. She could not keep up the deception. As for me, I saw it all. I had seen it from the first, I fancy, when, obeying that strange impulse which had led me thither, I caught the mocking, fantastic light of that will-o'-the-wisp which the child had endowed with her own pure fancies, and credited with her own steadfastness of faith.

The young face grew white and rigid as death; the hand went out towards the girl, whose pitying eyes were on her sightless orbs.

"Give me the letter."

The girl took it from her bosom and put it into the outstretched hand. I saw the child look down on it, open it; I saw the wandering touch that followed the brief and blotted lines. Then she turned to me.

"Will you read it for me, please?" she said, and held it out.

Involuntarily I looked at the girl standing there in her dazzling stage attire, seeing in this scene but the common tragedy of a common fate.

"You'd better read it," she said; "she's bound to know, soon or late. We all knew it was coming."

I turned to the child.

"Do you really wish me to read this letter?" I asked hesitatingly.

"If you please," she said. "You have been very kind to me to-night. I told you all about mother and myself. There can be nothing in the letter I should mind your reading."

I took it from her hand and read as follows:

"MY CHILD,

"For a time you will not see me. I am going away. I am going to leave this hateful, poverty-stricken life for one that is bright and rich, and beautiful. I am going to be married, Faith, to a great and wealthy lord, and we

are going abroad to other countries and other lands. Do not think I shall forget you. I never will. And you must be patient, and wait till I come back, as indeed I will. I leave some money in Nellie's care for you. I will send you more from time to time. Be brave and patient, dear, and we shall be happy again. One word more. If *they* come, say you know nothing of my whereabouts—only that I have left England.

"YOUR OWN MOTHER."

That was all. I read the cruel words, not daring to look at the face from which all light and life seemed to have been blotted out.

There was a dead silence in the little room.

For a moment the thought crossed me, how strange it was that I should have been called upon so unexpectedly to take part in a scene like this! I, than whom no less romantic individual ever lived! I, who had mounted to my seat on the omnibus that night without a thought of the consequences of that drive—who had let compassion for a child drift me into a situation as painful as it was unexpected—who stood here now the centre of a drama—the witness of a sorrow so pathetic, that I felt more like a participator in its origin than an onlooker at its result.

I thought this in the brief seconds following on my reading of that letter, as my eyes rested on the mute agony of the blind child's face.

She did not speak; she only sat there as if perfectly stunned. Then, at last, her helpless hands went out in search of that one friend who was faithful still.

"Tip," she said, and took the little dog up in her arms, and bent her head over him in silence.

I waited. I could not speak, and the girl's eyes were full of tears that slowly dropped upon her carmined cheeks.

"We are all alone, Tip, you and I," went on the child mournfully—"all alone. There is nothing for us to do here. We will go home and wait till she comes back. She has said she will come, and she will. I know she will. She won't forget her little Faith."

Then quite suddenly her arms relaxed. She raised her head.

"It will be such a long Christmas Day now," she cried piteously. "Oh, mother, mother!"

CONSEQUENCE THE FIRST.

NATURALLY, as it was all no business of mine, I should just have soothed the child with commonplace comfort, left her in charge of her mother's friend, and departed.

Sometimes I wonder if it would have been better had I done so. Sometimes—but then one never knows.

But in that hour I felt only compassion for the helpless creature deserted and left desolate, and my eyes grew dim, and my heart warmed to her, and I touched her small, cold hands in pitiful regret, and drew her away, and then, calling the first cab that passed, told the man to drive us to her home.

For long she was quite silent. Only she leant her head against my shoulder, and closed her eyes, and from time to time sighed wearily.

Along the brightly-lighted streets we drove—through crooked thoroughfares where the shadows of the houses were narrow as a knife, through broad ones, where mirth and revelry rang out. On, steadily on, till the midnight hour sounded clear and shrill from belfry and tower, and the Christmas bells rang out their old familiar tale.

At sound of them she started and turned to me.

"Is one happier when one is married?" she asked.

I felt confused at the odd question; but following the current of her thoughts, answered that it depended on circumstances. Some people were very much happier, especially if they loved the individuals they elected to marry.

Her pretty pale face grew wistful and shadowed.

"No one could love mother as I do," she said. "Some day I think she will know that. But if she is happy I can wait till she remembers me again. Perhaps she does not quite know I loved her so dearly. I often tried to tell her, but I could not. When one loves very much, it is not easy to talk of it."

I was so pleased to hear her voice again that I tried to draw her away from the sad and sombre subject of her thoughts, to speak hopefully of days to come. That I did not succeed shows only how clumsy and bungling are one's best intentions.

Time passed—we were nearing our destination.

She looked out of the window once, and said, just as naturally as if she could see:

"Is there a high wall on the right?"

"Yes," I answered.

"And this is a narrow street, and the houses are small, and gloomy, and old?"

"Yes."

"The last house is ours. The woman who lets it is an old servant. I am quite safe now. And, oh, I can't thank you for all your kindness! You have been so very, very good. Would you mind much if I ask you to let me see what you are like? Then I shall be able to have a picture of you to remember in my own mind."

"Certainly, if you wish," I said.

I felt the small, cold hands touch my face—that homely, rugged, unyouthful face which possessed not one element of manly beauty. It gave me the oddest, strangest sensation I had ever experienced.

"Thank you," she said softly. "I shall know you quite well now."

The cab stopped. I sprang out and lifted her to the ground, and put Tip's leading-string into her hand. Again I might have left her; again chance offered me the opportunity of saving myself from the ill-fated consequences of this strange night; and again the offer was vain.

I walked up to the door and knocked. It was flung open directly.

"What a time you have been!" cried a voice impatiently. "Why——"

"Mother is not coming," said the child sadly. "I am to tell you she has gone away."

"Away! Where?"

Then the speaker's eyes fell on me. I saw him start. A dark, shabbily-dressed, ill-conditioned man he was, with long, dark hair falling about his throat, and small, keen eyes that flashed suspicion at my own.

"Pray may I ask who you are?" he said rudely.

"He is a friend of mine," interposed the child hurriedly.

"He came to see me safely home. Good-night, sir," she added to me. "I am so much obliged to you! And now, please, go. I am quite safe."

As she spoke, there came from the room within a burst of discordant voices, fierce oaths, the sound of a struggle, a cry. The man who had come to the door rushed hurriedly away.

The child turned to me in agony.

"Oh, go—go!" she cried wildly. "They will kill you if you remain. They are so cruel and so wicked. You do not know——"

She stopped. Her face blanched with sudden terror; her hand clasped mine. Her words had been cut short by a heavy crash—the fall of some weighty body. To the din and riot of the moment before succeeded a breathless silence. I flung off her clinging touch; I forgot prudence; I never thought that I was here in an unknown house, among unknown and perhaps desperate men. I rushed to the door and flung it open.

As I did so—as in one second's space of terror and defiance I faced that crowd of bearded, ruffianly-looking villains—there came a sudden darkness. The light was extinguished. A dozen hands pinioned me and held me helpless. I was forced to my knees, and the cold steel of a dagger touched my throat, while afar off and faint came a child's low cry of terror.

Resistance was so utterly useless, that it never occurred to me to make any. My arms were pinioned—a thick bandage was placed over my eyes. I still knelt there, with an unseen goaler on either side holding me by the shoulders. Then suddenly I became conscious of light. I heard voices whispering in a strange and unknown tongue. Above them all, the strange, sonorous tones of the man who had come to the door. He seemed trying to urge something, but in vain. At last he addressed me:

"You are a stranger and an Englishman. Unmasked and undesired, you have forced your way in hither. Here in this land you have your own brotherhoods; each and all of these are fenced and defended by rules and laws that no outsider dare infringe. Tell me, if you had thrust your way into such assemblage as you have thrust it into our midst, what penalty would be demanded?"

There came a low growl from the unseen crowd around me.

"Death, or the oath!" it muttered. "Why bandy words? Death, or the oath!"

I cast my memory back to tales I had been told; to the ridicule which I had heard directed against the mysteries of masonry; to all the legends and superstitions of crafts and societies; to the more modern and less dramatic incidents of various brotherhoods. I remembered that I had

never heard of but one penalty for the rash intruder who had penetrated, unasked and uninitiated, into these solemn mysteries—the oath of secrecy.

"Speak!" went on the voice.

There flashed before me the helplessness of my situation, as they say his whole life flashes before the eyes of the drowning man. I had that day left my lodgings, and gone to an hotel. My luggage was there, unaddressed, unlabelled—not a soul knew of my whereabouts. I had not a relative in London, and very few friends. I should not be missed for days, perhaps; even if I were, who could possibly trace me here? It takes long to write these things; it took a very short time to think them. With a strenuous effort I found my tongue, but my voice sounded odd and far off.

"I am not a member of any such brotherhood, nor do I know anything of their laws. I have seen nothing here, nor do I desire to do so. My intrusion was involuntary. If you assure me that no act of violence has been committed, I will at once retire and give you my word of honour to mention nothing of your meeting-place."

There was another hurried consultation. I could understand no word of it.

Then again the voice of the leader spoke:

"We cannot trust you. You must take the oath."

I was silent. I could scarcely believe but that I was the victim of some delusion, or labouring under the effects of some melodramatic nightmare.

The pressure on my shoulder tightened.

"Speak!" hissed a voice in my ear; "say you will take the oath."

The room was still—horribly still. I could hear the low, hoarse breathing of the men, and afar off the plaintive murmur of a child's voice. I think that decided me. The thought of the little, fragile, lonely creature, deserted by her mother, at the mercy of this ruffianly crew. I raised my head at last.

"I will do what you wish," I said.

CONSEQUENCE THE SECOND.

WHAT manner of man was I whom these strange things befell, and who now recount them long years afterwards? I

was neither young nor old, neither rich nor poor ; I was an artist by profession, but only followed my art in a desultory, uncertain fashion. I was weak of health, and led a lonely life—a studious, absorbed, perhaps unmanly life, the result of a sickly youth, and a somewhat reserved disposition. I was not particularly prepossessing in appearance. I think no woman's eyes had ever rested on me with favour, and I think, too, I loved nature far better than my own species.

This is the picture I present to myself at the time of which I write. This the only excuse I find to offer for what might seem like cowardice. I had no one to care what I did with my life ; perhaps I should have sold it as dearly as I could, sooner than have saved it at cost of honour. For, indeed, the terrible oath I was forced to take in favour of a society of which I knew nothing, of deeds at which I could not guess, seemed a heavy price to pay for my own preservation. But I think, however valueless life seems, one never realises its full worth till it is suddenly threatened ; till death stands grim and stern before one, no longer a far-off impalpable shadow, but a terrible reality.

My word once pledged, I was led into another room, still pinioned and blindfold, and seated roughly on a chair ; then the door was locked and I was left alone. How long the time seemed ! I heard steps and voices, and hurrying to and fro of many feet. I tried in vain to unloose my bonds. They were fastened too securely.

Then there came the sound of a closing door, and then a long, long silence. My patience was exhausted. I stamped on the floor, I knocked the chair against the wall, I did everything I could to acquaint the household with my imprisoned existence. At last I heard the key turn, the door open. A soft hand touched my arm.

"Are you safe ? Have they hurt you ?" asked the little plaintive voice I knew so well already.

"I am safe enough," I said, not very amiably, I fear. "But my arms are bound, and I can't free them."

"Let me try," she said, and the little fingers busied themselves over the knots and finally unfastened them.

Then I snatched the bandage from my eyes and looked around. I was in a small room, empty of furniture, except a broken table in the window and the chair on which I had been seated.

Before me, with her white, floating garments and fair, rippling hair, stood the little blind girl. I could almost have fancied the events of the past hour a dream, as I looked down at the sightless orbs and helpless figure.

"Child," I said hurriedly, "who are those men, and what have they to do with you?"

"They are mother's friends," she said sadly; "that is all I know."

"But they are foreigners," I said, "and you are English. What is your mother?"

"She is French," said the child. "My father was an Englishman. I have heard so—I do not remember him."

"And what are you going to do now?" I asked. "You cannot live here all alone."

"Old Fleure will take care of me," she answered simply. "I must stay here till mother comes back. She told me to wait for her you know."

She sighed, then held both her hands out to me.

"Oh," she cried, "I am so sorry you came here—so very, very sorry. I don't know what they did. Fleure made me go away. I was so frightened, and Nell has not come back to-night. When the house grew quiet, Fleure told me I might let you out. They have not hurt you—tell me they have not hurt you."

"No, no," I cried eagerly; "not the least bit in the world. They only shut me up here for a time. I intruded on a meeting, I believe, and they were angry, but there's no harm done. Do not trouble your head about me any more."

As I spoke my eyes fell upon my hands; across the palm and fingers of one lay a dark smear. Involuntarily I started and looked closer. It was a stain of blood.

I remembered now I had tripped and fallen on entering the room, that my hand had touched the floor. A horrible sick feeling crept over me. What had been done—what had meant the cry and the fall which had drawn me across that fatal threshold?

The child noticed my sudden silence.

"What is it?" she asked faintly. "Why don't you speak? They—have they made you blind also?"

I stared at her. Beyond and above the pity I already felt, something seemed to flash like a suspicion, more dread and horrible than I could put into words. I saw her a

victim—a martyr, too, standing on the threshold of that darkened life, with a history of terror as her portion.

"They made you blind!" I gasped. "You—a child—an infant almost! Good Heavens! into what a den of fiends have I penetrated!"

"I told you they were bad and cruel," she said mournfully. "Mother was afraid of them always, but she could not help herself; no more could my father, nor I—and now you, also, will be in their power. Oh, why did I let you come? Why did I forget——?"

I put my arm round the trembling figure.

"Do not fret about it," I said. "There is no harm done. I suppose they are only a set of conspirators—political, I dare say—full of mistaken patriotism, wild ideas of freedom and fraternity. So, at least, I gathered from the oath I took."

"The oath you took!" she echoed.

"Yes," I answered cheerfully. "I was obliged to give in to their scruples. You see, I had come upon their meeting-place; I had surprised them. There had been a quarrel. They were all angry, and afraid of betrayal; so in a way, I am one of themselves now. I——"

Oh, the shuddering wail, the low, pitiful cry of terror!

Never, so long as I live, shall I forget them, or the livid horror of the child's face.

"One of them—one of them! No, no! You can't mean it—you don't mean it! You don't know what they are!"

I stared at her stupidly.

"What are they, then?" I asked.

She came a few steps nearer; she drew me down to her level, and whispered something in my ear.

I started back in horror. I saw then how I had been entrapped and deceived. No political brotherhood this—no association of mistaken and over-zealous patriots—no society that held one redeeming quality, or ennobling excuse for crimes committed, for lives martyred, for friends betrayed.

I had given my oath of secrecy to a gang of forgers!

CONSEQUENCE THE THIRD.

I AM ashamed to say at what hour, or with what sort of aspect, I presented myself at my highly respectable hotel that Christmas Eve, or rather morning.

I saw the porter look suspiciously at me. I did not

wonder at that when I reached my room and viewed my reflection in the glass. Disordered hair, pale face, wild eyes, certainly did not add to my usually unattractive appearance.

I flung off my clothes, and threw myself on the bed, utterly spent and fagged. I was too tired even to think. My eyes closed. Sleep stole over my brain in kindly fashion, and for hours I lost all memory of that horrible night, which was destined to haunt both waking and sleeping moments for many long years to come.

When I woke it was already mid-day. The sun was shining brightly, and I sprang up and looked around with a certain unfamiliar sensation, as if I had had a long, wild dream, and was thankful it was only a dream.

Before I had half finished dressing, I, however, became assured that the events of that Christmas Eve were real enough.

I thought, with a half-savage impatience, of my folly in mixing myself up with other people's business. I wished, vainly enough, that my craze for wandering about in London suburbs had not led me to mount that special omnibus.

I wished—but no, I stopped there. I could not wish I had never seen that blind child, with her innocent face, and strange, sad fate. I had never pitied any living creature as I pitied her. I thought of her spending her lonely Christmas Day in that dreary house, and my heart ached. I pictured the little gentle figure flitting from room to room, looking forward to that hope her mother's letter had expressed, building up her tender innocent fancies on that return for which she had set herself to watch and wait.

It was not very lively work to spend Christmas Day in an hotel by oneself, so, after a meal that was a sort of compromise between breakfast and luncheon, I went out for a stroll through the deserted streets. Anyone knows the effect of trying to argue down an inclination. You invariably give in to it at last, in sheer desperation. I spent the best part of that day in resolving to avoid the very neighbourhood in which I at length found myself.

The short December day was drawing to a close. The winter sunset glowed warm and bright in the west. I found my way to the street where I had been the previous night. I walked up it with a strange reluctant feeling. I passed house after house—I came to the last. It was

closed and dark. Every blind was down. There was no sign of life or habitation about it. Two or three times I paced up and down, trying to summon courage to knock—looking in vain for a gleam of light from the cheerless interior.

The house, as I have said, was the last in the road. On one side of it ran a transverse street, containing a number of dreary, tumble-down warehouses. Next to it, on the other side, was an empty house, with notices of "To let" staring out from every window.

At last I made up my mind to knock, and did so in a mild and apologetic fashion. There was no answer. I knocked again. All was silent. The house seemed deserted. I tried again, loudly and firmly now. In vain.

There was evidently not a living soul in the place, despite what the child had told me the previous night.

Disappointed, and a little angered with my own folly, I at last gave up the hopeless task, and turned away. As I was closing the gate after me, my eyes fell on a tiny white speck lying in the apology for a garden which separated the house from the road. I stooped and picked it up. It was a fragment of paper covered with the oddest writing I had ever seen. I took it to the street-lamp, and read as follows :

"They have taken me away from here. I don't know where we are going. They say I shall see mother, but I don't believe them. Oh, if I could only have seen you once more! I have dropped this in the garden; perhaps some day you may find it. And yet, why should you care? Oh, why—why were you so good to me? And oh, what must you think?"

"FAITH."

I put the strange little scrawl into my pocket, and walked away. Perhaps I ought to have been relieved that now there was no necessity to trouble my head about the child. Fate had removed her from my path, obliterated all trace of her identity; and yet I was not in any way relieved or glad. Rather, a nervous kind of dread seemed to fasten itself upon me. A horror of what that little, helpless, unfortunate creature might have to endure, or be enduring even now.

Of course it was no business of mine, but I was past the consolation of that argument. I went home restless, dejected, miserable.

Had it not been Christmas-night I should have gone to the theatre, and tried to see the girl Nellie ; but that was out of the question, so I had my solitary repast, and then went to the deserted smoking-room to read the papers.

I felt vexed I had not given the child my address ; but then I had no idea she could write—still less had I thought she would have vanished so utterly and completely in so short a space of time.

"Ah, well," I said to myself at last, "it's no use to think any more of the matter. It was a curious adventure, and it's over. I trust I may never again see or hear aught of that ruffianly crew to whom I have sworn secrecy."

Then I thought of that prostrate figure—of the cruel faces—of the blood-stains on my hands. Involuntarily I stretched them out and looked at them.

As I dropped them again, I raised my head. Opposite to me was a large mirror. In it I saw a figure watching me intently—the figure of the head-waiter.

I turned abruptly. A feeling of annoyance crept over me.

"Why are you staring at me ?" I asked roughly.

The man coloured—muttered a hasty apology, and shuffled away.

I threw my half-finished cigar aside, and tossed the papers impatiently into a heap. I thought, early as it was, I would go to bed, and so made my way upstairs. On the first landing a waiter met me. I thought he looked at me very oddly. At the second the same thing happened. Outside my bedroom, two men were hanging about, and again I observed the covert, watchful way in which they regarded me.

"What on earth can be the matter with me ?" I thought, and I walked up to the looking-glass to see if I displayed any signs of peculiarity.

No. To myself, I looked just as I always did, and I dismissed the waiters and their ways with some rather uncomplimentary directness. Then I got into bed, and again slept soundly and dreamlessly till the sun awoke me next morning.

While dressing I formed a resolution. I thought I would leave London, and run down into Devonshire for a little change. I was familiar with most of its favoured haunts. I had taken many a sketching-tour among its beauties. It was, in fact, my favourite resort whenever I felt hipped. or out of sorts.

There was nothing to detain me in London, and the events of the past two days had somewhat discomposed me.

However, I wished to try one more source of information about the blind child, and so thought I would go round to the Coronet Theatre that night and see the girl Nellie.

I went down to the coffee-room and ordered breakfast. Pre-occupied as I was, I again noticed the odd looks of the waiters, and wondered what they meant. I asked for the morning papers, and one of the men brought them.

"Strange affair this murder, sir," he remarked, as he handed the *Times* to me.

"Murder!" I said, and looked up from my plate, startled by his tone and the ominous sound of the word.

"Yes, sir; murder at Kilburn, on Christmas Eve."

I felt a cold chill at my heart. I knew my face was changing colour and that the man's eyes were upon me. I seized the paper to hide my confusion; and my eyes searched the closely-printed columns. Yes, there it was, plain enough.

"Mysterious murder at Kilburn." Mechanically I read the account, though I seemed to know it all so well from the very first. The road, the house, the suspicion of the policeman at its sudden vacation. The search, and discovery of the body, stabbed through the heart and hidden in the cellar.

For a moment, a sort of horror seized me. What evil fate had thrust me into the midst of these horrible complications—had dogged my steps from that commonplace omnibus-ride on Christmas Eve to the tragedy that now faced me?

I could not tell. As a rule, I was somewhat indolent of disposition, rarely going below the surface of events. How could I possibly have imagined that a brief interest in a child would have led me into such a situation as this? I let the paper drop from my hand and caught sight of my startled face looking at me with a strange unfamiliarity from the opposite mirror. A grim smile came to my lips. "I have often said I would write a book," I thought to myself. "At this rate, I need not go far to collect materials."

I finished my breakfast with but little appetite; my mind was racked and disturbed. I was debating with myself as to whether I was not lawfully bound to give the information in my possession—as to whether the horrors of that enforced oath were binding upon me. In fact, my brain seemed thoroughly unsettled, and it became quite a difficult matter

to think clearly, or collectively, of the strange incidents that had come under my notice.

I started suddenly. I had a dim consciousness that a voice had been sounding in my ears, but I had not taken in its communication.

It was only the waiter again, enquiring what time I would like luncheon.

I rose impatiently.

"I can't tell. I may not be back," I said. "I am leaving London to night."

Again that odd look came over the man's face. He said nothing more, and I left the room, and, soon after, the hotel, and went out into the streets to walk down my perplexed and irresolute thoughts.

It was a bright, cold morning; the streets were thronged with holiday folk and excursionists, and a general air of hilarity and enjoyment seemed to prevail. But amidst it all I moved with a nightmare-like sense of gloom and responsibility, asking myself the same question, "What ought I to do?"

I thought of going to a magistrate and telling him my strange story. I could give no clue to the murderers, it is true, and there was a strong air of improbability about my adventure. I knew, too, that it would be at the risk of my life if I betrayed these men, and that they would probably read the account of my evidence. I could not swear positively to the identity of any one of them, except the dark-faced, long-haired man, who had spoken to the child at the door, and I had only seen him in semi-darkness, and for a moment.

My conjectures, and my own fatal habit of indecision, occupied me to the exclusion of everything else. Mechanically I wandered on; finally I roused myself with an effort, and looked around; once more I was in that fatal street.

Again, I suppose, an adverse fate gained possession of me. I walked on, and passed by the house where the murder had occurred.

People were rushing about, or standing in groups staring at it in that peculiarly idiotic fashion of English lovers of sensation, who find the utmost delight in gaping at any spot made famous by horror, or crime. I walked quickly by the various knots and groups. At the garden-gate were stationed two policemen; all the blinds were down. The house looked

melancholy and deserted. I did not stop ; my wretched mind was still undecided. I thought I would walk round by the mouldy warehouses, and return again and put some questions to the officers of the law.

At this time I suddenly became conscious that I was not alone—in fact, that I had not been alone for a long time. I can't say how the idea first came, or passed from a vague fancy into certainty ; but I know as I turned into the dark, narrow street that someone turned into it close upon my heels, that in a moment of indignation I faced round and saw a slight, pale-faced man beside me.

"What do you want, and why are you following me ? " I asked sharply.

The man smiled in an odd, meaning way.

"Come, sir," he said persuasively, "I don't want no disagreeables if it can be avoided. Will you come with me and answer a few questions just in a reasonable way ? You're staying at the Provincial Hotel. I think you know a little about this here business. Excuse me for saying that if you just come along quietly 'tis better. I don't like any unpleasantness with gentlemen. We'll just step quiet into a hansom and bowl along, and in half an hour you'll be free again."

I stared at the man.

"How do you know me ? " I asked with some curiosity.

He nodded his head sagely.

"Bless your heart, sir, that's my business. I know you were here on Christmas Eve—on these very premises. How or why I know it, don't signify. Now you needn't go for to say anything. Just come along sensible and quiet. You'll be asked a few questions, and if you can answer them satisfactory, why so much the better. You won't mind my taking your arm till we gets that hansom. I only want to make things as pleasant as I can."

"No," I said mechanically, "I will come."

Fate had saved me any further trouble. There was no need to make up my mind on the matter ; it had been done for me.

How everything flashed across me during that ride. The porter's suspicious looks at my late arrival on the Christmas Eve ; the stains on my hands ; my strange appearance and disordered attire.

If these facts had been commented on by the whole hotel

I must naturally have become an object of interest and suspicion.

Heaven only knew how the law had already set itself on my track or was here at my heels. I could only follow the course of events in a bewildered and half-indignant fashion. I—at times—really asked myself if I were not the sport of some long and hideous dream. It seemed to be impossible that the next event in this chapter of accidents would be an examination for murder. I laughed grimly at the thought. As I did so, I saw my companion turn and regard me with an attention that held something like fear.

"Oh, I'm not mad," I said coolly, "though no doubt many people will consider me so before I get clear of all this. To think that a chance ride on an omnibus should end in a criminal accusation! It seems rather odd. I suppose there's no doubt about my being awake?"

"No doubt whatever, sir, and you'd better not commit yourself by such observations as these 'ere."

Again I laughed. I really could not help it. It all looked so like a huge practical joke played by spite, or some Demon Mischance suited to Christmas pantomime. However, I did not speak again till I found myself in the presence of a magistrate, and heard the queerest and most disjointed story of myself and my doings related by the clever and intelligent member of the detective force whose particular friend, the head-waiter of the Provincial Hotel, had given him this information about me over a cheerful glass of grog on Christmas Day.

CONSEQUENCE THE FOURTH.

I HAD for years looked upon myself as a very harmless—if not useful member of society. I came away after that interview with an idea that I was nothing short of an abandoned villain.

I really was in a most unfortunate position. The two friends who would have stood surety for my respectability, were away staying for Christmas at different country houses and I did not know their present addresses. My story, as deduced from the head-waiter and the detective's evidence, was, to say the least of it, very improbable and highly suspicious.

I had arrived—a stranger—at a strange hotel, taken a

room, left my luggage, gone out on that fatal Christmas Eve, returned at three o'clock in the morning, disordered, wild-looking, and blood-stained, but perfectly sober. To the eyes of the authorities of that hotel I had seemed so odd and strange that their attention had been directed towards me from the hour of my arrival. The head-waiter, as I have before stated, had a friend in the detective force, and over a cheerful glass, on the convivial anniversary of Christmas, he had communicated my little peculiarities and odd appearance to this individual.

Then came the news of the murder, setting all the police and detective forces on the *qui vive* to make discoveries.

Remembering the strange story he had heard of me and my doings on that very night, the detective hastened to his friend. I was just going for my walk ; was pointed out to him ; he followed me ; and my ill-fate of course took me to the very neighbourhood of the murder.

The man made up in his mind in a moment, arrested me, and bore me off in triumph to the magistrate for a preliminary examination. So much for his story. Then came mine.

When I told them about the blind child and the enforced oath, they looked politely incredulous.

The child had disappeared—that was to be expected. There was no one to bear out my statement. The magistrate was extremely sorry, but under the circumstances he considered it his duty to detain me in custody until further investigations had been made.

I could scarcely believe my ears, and yet I could not blame him for discrediting me, or imagining I was telling them some wild romance. I believe they took me for a member of some secret society, and imagined I had murdered the man by order, and was trying to shuffle out of it by inventing this tale. Perhaps the very sense of its improbability affected me, and made my evidence weak, and my manner conscious. I cannot tell. Only the harsh fact remained. I was looked upon as guilty, and there seemed very little chance of clearing myself.

None of the gang were likely to come forward. The child had disappeared. She would, perhaps, never hear of my misfortune, and I could do nothing in the way of proving my statements, unless she would swear to their truth. I really felt I was in a very awkward predicament. The only

thing I could do was to write to my two friends at their London addresses, and trust to the letters being forwarded.

It would certainly be unpleasant to have my name figuring in the newspapers, and my story the sport of every penny-a-liner who chose to make capital of it ; but there was no help for it now. The more I said, the more damaging the case seemed to look. I had been on the spot when the murder was committed, and I had given no information on the subject. My conduct had been most extraordinary, and my account of it was most improbable.

The magistrate was a little, shrivelled old man, who was very deaf, and suffering from a bad cold, and wanted his luncheon. No doubt I seemed to him an abandoned ruffian—at least, he treated me as if I were ; and I was finally handed down to the policeman to be detained until the next examination.

To say I was indignant is to say very little. It seemed to me that at this rate I might expect to hear myself condemned to be hung before very long.

Then suddenly I remembered the girl at the theatre. She could speak for me ; she could prove that I had come there with the child, and we had left together. I had the free use of pen and ink, and accordingly wrote a letter to her, telling her my predicament, and asking her if she had any idea where little Faith was.

When the letter was finished, I remembered I did not know the girl's name. However, I addressed it simply, "Miss Nellie —, Coronet Theatre," and secured a messenger to take it there.

An answer came sooner than I could have anticipated :

"I know nothing of Faith. Was at rehearsal when your messenger came. I will say what I can for you, but fear my evidence won't do you much good, even if they take it.

"NELLIE VERNON."

Over the horrors of that night and my own state of suspense and discomfort, I will draw a veil of silence.

The next day I was again examined, and, faithful to her word, the girl Nellie appeared.

I wished that she had not blackened her eyes, and tinted her cheeks, that her hair was not so very golden, and her appearance so very remarkable. What could I expect from such a witness ? The magistrate was deafer, and hoarser,

and far worse tempered than even on the preceding day. He asked the girl so many questions as to her calling and respectability, that she lost her temper, and as good as told him to mind his own business. In fact, she only left a more damaging impression of me and my morals and general behaviour on the mind of this magnate of the law, than he had previously entertained.

He would not release me. He altogether refused to believe the story of the blind child, and that she could have disappeared in so mysterious a fashion, and I saw no way of getting out of this predicament, unless I engaged competent legal advice. Another day dragged on its dreary length. I had sent for a lawyer, taking a name haphazard from a legal directory, and he came and heard my story, and evidently looked upon me as a mild imbecile. He promised, however, to do all he could to procure my release talked a great deal about not committing myself, and patience, and unfortunate circumstances, collected the addresses of any acquaintances or friends—Heaven knows they were few enough!—who might vouch for my respectability, and then took himself off to look into the case. He must have been looking into it a very long time, for I heard no more of him for the next two days, and I was still in "durance vile."

I had given him the child's letter, and had described her as accurately as possible, but I never expected him to trace her. I feared her gaolers were too clever and too cunning for that.

Another night of suspense, another morning of hope, then the summons for further examination reached me.

Again the evidence was recapitulated. Again I beheld myself in the light of an abandoned villain. Again were nerves and temper tried to the uttermost. I really expected to hear myself formally accused of murdering a man I had never seen, or being somebody I had never known, so confusing were the details, and so cleverly was the case made out by the detectives.

But at the end my counsel rose. He made a long speech, the purport of which I could not clearly understand. Then he affirmed he would call witnesses capable of proving my entire innocence.

This sounded satisfactory, but I doubted his ability to do so.

However, my two friends appeared, having been roughly dragged from their comfortable county quarters by ruthless

telegrams and subpoenas. So far good. My respectability was vouched for at last. Then, it seemed to me, there was a long pause. The gruff old magistrate looked at his papers. My legal adviser was holding an earnest colloquy with another member of the profession. I looked about me, and at the narrow, dark little court, and the curious faces. I wondered what they were all waiting for.

Then came a faint stir and movement. I turned my eyes—I started. Why, who was this? Was I dreaming? For there in the witness box before me stood the blind child, pale, fragile, shadowy, but with her sweet face aglow with earnestness, and her sightless eyes turned to the pitying gaze of the crowded court.

I could have embraced that lawyer in the joy of my heart. I could scarcely believe that in so short a time he could have tracked and found the child. I was so agitated that I could scarcely hear the low, faltering tones of her voice corroborating my story to the letter.

In addition I learnt that an hour after I left, the old woman had roughly aroused her from sleep, dressed her, and packed up a few clothes and necessities, and made her leave the house. She had found a scrap of paper, and on it had pencilled those hurried words I had afterwards found in the garden. They had walked a long distance, then travelled for hours by train, but where she could not say. She had been too ill and weak to travel next day, as the woman wished.

They were in some little country village; she did not know the name. She was sitting by the door of the cottage where they lodged when a gentleman came and spoke to her, and said she must go back to London immediately.

Fleure was away. There was no time to lose. She left a message, took her little dog, and came.

Her simple story, her helplessness, the spiritual beauty of her face, moved everyone greatly.

As for myself, I was graciously set at liberty "without a stain on my character," for which acknowledgment I fear I did not feel sufficiently grateful, and the necessary formalities having been gone through, I left the court a free man at last.

My first thought was for the child. She was waiting for me in company with the lawyer. I learnt from him that he had tracked her to the South Western Railway Station—

traced her from thence to Bodmin, in Cornwall, and then to the little out-of-the-way village from whence she had been brought to London by the skilful detective he had employed.

Her innocent delight at finding me was very touching. I found she was staying in the lawyer's own house, and thither I myself was borne in triumph to celebrate my release by a friendly dinner.

Mrs. Walford, the wife of my clever counsel, had taken a great fancy to the child, and begged her to remain under her care, but Faith would not hear of it. I offered to take her back to Cornwall the next day, and she had at once acquiesced. I had sent for my belongings to the Provincial, and that night I made up my mind to remain in Cornwall instead of Devon, for a time at least.

To tell the truth, my blood was up, and I felt furious with the cowardly ruffians, who had blighted the life of an innocent child, and would not have stirred a finger to prevent the sacrifice of a human life.

I grew reckless of my own risk in breaking that brutal oath. I resolved that if fate threw one of that gang in my way again I would not spare him.

I told the whole facts to Mr. Walford, and described the one man whose face I had seen. I also promised to keep him constantly informed of my whereabouts, in case I was required as a witness at any future time.

"Government will offer a reward to-morrow," he said to me. "The murderer must be discovered. I am in hopes one of the gang will turn Queen's evidence. The sum and the free pardon ought to tempt them."

On the morrow little Faith and I took our way down to the cold, bleak Cornish coast, and went straight to the cottage where old Fleure had been left.

She was there no longer.

Without a word or sign she had disappeared, and Faith was left utterly unprotected.

What was she to do?

I looked at the piteous face—the little, helpless, forlorn creature. On the impulse of the moment I took her hands in mine, and tried to stay her tears.

"I, too, am alone and homeless," I said. "Let us cast in our lots together. I will be your guardian, Faith, and my home shall be yours as long as I live. "Can you trust me?"

Her small fingers clasped themselves with tighter pressure round my own.

"Trust you. Oh yes! But I could not be a burden on your charity—indeed—indeed I could not!"

I laughed aloud.

"A burden—you? Don't talk nonsense, child. You will save me from growing a misanthrope and a cynic. We have not had very happy times, you or I, let us try if we can't make them a little brighter for each other."

The tears still fell down her cheeks, but she did not draw away her hands.

"May Heaven bless you!" she said. "I—I can do nothing for you in return for all your kindness, except—love you with all my heart."

"I ask no better payment," I said gently.

And so the bargain was concluded.

CONSEQUENCE THE FIFTH.

It seemed to me too bleak and cold on that Cornish coast for my little charge, so I took her away with me to South Devon, and there we spent the winter peacefully and undisturbedly.

It was a very happy time for me, and for my child. I had taken to calling her that quite easily and naturally, and she soon dropped the stiff "Mr. Forsyth," for the more homely title of "guardian." The most perfect confidence existed between us, though I am sure we must have seemed an oddly assorted pair. Her education was my great delight, and her quickness of mind and retentive memory made it an easy task to teach her anything. Her blindness was no drawback whatever. I had simply to read and explain—she would repeat it, and never again forget it. Indeed, after a short time, I scarcely remembered she was blind.

She moved about the little cottage as naturally and quietly as if she could see its every detail. Her movements were as graceful and serene as eye could desire. There were times when I could not even pity for her what I had considered an affliction, she herself seemed so unconscious of it.

The winter passed on, and no word reached me of that melo-dramatic episode in which I had been involved. At times it looked to me like a horrible dream. I could not

imagine I had really been concerned in it. In spite of the reward offered by Government, and the efforts of the zealous police, no faintest clue was obtained to that gang of miscreants. They seemed to have disappeared utterly, and at last even the papers seemed to have grown tired of remarking on the "Kilburn Mystery."

At times I thought the child fretted for her mother, and often she would question me, and ask if I thought she would ever find her now that she was no longer at the house where their home had been. As far as I could, I comforted the child, telling her it would be an easy matter to trace her, if her mother came to England."

In my own mind I deemed it far better that they should never meet again; but I instilled no word of doubt into Faith's innocent mind, only tried my best to console her with pretty and improbable fictions, in order to win back the soft smile I so loved to see.

It was such a novel thing to me to have anyone dependent on me, trusting to me, loving me so entirely and so innocently as did my little Faith, that I gave myself up to these new sensations with a keen and inexhaustible delight.

My child and I were scarcely ever apart. We walked, and talked, and drove, and idled, and dreamed, and employed ourselves from morning to night. Nothing disturbed the serenity of our lives, except now and then a letter from Mr. Walford; and as time passed on, and nothing more was heard of the mysterious murder, I began to think it was destined to add another to that list of undiscovered crimes which disgrace the annals of jurisdiction.

The winter passed. The sweet springtime was at hand. Faith and I revelled in the dawning beauties of leaf and blossom. I searched for violets and primroses, and brought her the very earliest of their kind. We listened to the cuckoo's song, and skimmed lazily over the bright waters, and I made sketches and described them to her, or sent her for rambles through the pretty, shady glades, with the faithful Tip for her guide.

I used to love to watch her flitting through them, her white dress—I always liked her to wear white—her fair floating hair, her sweet, pure face, making a picture that all my efforts could not produce with any satisfaction to myself.

It is always hard to describe anyone one loves. I cannot describe my child's gentle ways, her soft movements, her smile that held so sweet a mystery, her voice that was like some hushed and solemn strain of music.

I never saw her angry, or restless, or dissatisfied. Her gratitude and love for me were manifested in a thousand delicate, thoughtful ways. It seemed to me often as if I never could have been without her—as if there never could have been a time when I had not known her soft ministry, her unfailing thought, her worshipping love.

The happy spring passed also, and summer came, and I began to think I must go up to London about my pictures. Two were in the Academy, and one of these had found a purchaser.

The gentleman was a friend of Mr. Walford's. At first I thought of leaving Faith behind at the cottage, but she begged me so earnestly to take her also to London that I at last gave way.

We were to stay with the Walfords, and the first week in June found us both in London.

I had no desire to stay very long in town, and I left Faith to herself while I went about on business, feeling sure that she was safe under Mrs. Walford's guardianship. She was always the first to welcome me on my return home, and that welcome had become a very sweet necessity to my life now. It seemed to me that the soft breath of the young summer had beautified and revived the child's own life. That sense of repose and calm deepened about her, and gave her a beauty and a happiness that gladdened my eyes each day afresh.

A week had passed.

I left Faith one morning, telling her that the next day we should be free to seek our country home again. It did my heart good to see how radiant she looked. Like myself the breath of country air, the sounds of woods and waters, the sweet, rich sense of freedom and unrestraint, were to her worth all the pleasures of cities. On this last day I had resolved to go and look at that fatal house again. I told her nothing of my intention, for fear it should agitate her. I had discovered that Nellie Vernon had left the Coronet Theatre, and no one there knew her address.

The Kilburn house looked dismal in the extreme. It had too bad a name now to find a tenant. I passed by it

with an odd feeling of repulsion and horror, remembering all that happened there—remembering, too, that undiscovered mystery about it, and the fateful crime that still clamoured for retribution.

It seemed strange to think of these men and their sudden disappearance, but it was not a pleasant reflection to me that they all knew my appearance perfectly well, and I had only been able to distinguish one of their number.

I did not stay long in that ill-omened street. Having satisfied myself that the house was still to let and likely to continue so, I passed on, and as it was growing late, summoned a hansom, and directed him to drive me to Bedford Square.

It was nearly half-past seven when I arrived. The Walfords dined punctually at the half-hour, so I ran straight up the stairs to my bedroom to dress—for once in my life not tarrying to ask for, or call my child.

I came down a few minutes after the gong had sounded, and was beginning a hasty apology to my hostess when I noticed Faith was not in the room. The occurrence was so unusual that I forgot my manners, and stopped in the midst of my excuses.

"Why, where is Faith?" I asked.

"Was she not with you?" asked Mrs. Walford, turning very pale.

"With me? No. Good Heavens!" I cried in terror, "is she not in the house?"

"No," faltered Mrs. Walford. "I have been out all the afternoon paying visits. When I returned the housemaid said a lady had been here to see Faith. The child went upstairs and put on her bonnet and left the house with this lady, merely saying she would return with you at seven o'clock. Of course I thought you had sent for her. Where can she have gone?"

I stood there and looked at her in stupefied silence.

Gone! My child gone! Whose work was this?

Not a word—not a clue to her fate. The cold dark waters of mystery to close over the bright head, the young fair life I loved.

I remember I turned away from the two troubled and pitying faces. I remember I groped my way to the door and took my coat and hat from the stand in the hall, and stood looking out at the lighted streets and the pearly

liquid moonlight with dazed and half-blind eyes. I remember that someone spoke to me and asked me what I was going to do, and that I answered like one in a dream, "To look for her," and then I went out into the sweet, hot, summer dusk, and my search began.

For two long years that search went on—in vain. Ah, Heaven pity me—in vain !

CONSEQUENCE THE SIXTH.

To wait through long hours that deepen into days—through days that change to weeks and months—to wait and wait for something that never comes, till the heart grows sick with suspense, and the brain aches with vain longing—can any torture be worse? I think not.

I did what I could. I employed all possible means to trace her, but had the earth opened and swallowed my little girl, she could not have disappeared more utterly and completely. One thing alone could have decoyed her from me, that I knew—her mother. Perhaps she had returned—perhaps some false message had lured the child back to her; perhaps—oh, Heaven only knows through what maze of wild and impossible conjectures fancy led me; but I grew weary of false hopes at last, the long strain relaxed, the tired heart sank back into dumb quiescence. I said to myself, "I can only wait; some day I shall learn the truth."

I did not, even when I was most angered or most hurt, accuse her of ingratitude. I was convinced that through no fault of hers this blow had come. It seemed strange to myself, it seemed doubly strange to others, that I should care so much for a little castaway; but then no one but myself knew how cold and empty a thing my life had been, how my ill-favoured face and my unfortunate disposition had served to isolate me from the common pleasures, and enjoyments, and frivolities which make up so large a sum in most men's lives. And this strange creature had loved me so, had stood as so sweet a link between me and my dreary, homeless existence, that almost unconsciously she had become dearer than any other thing life held. In those few months of close and constant association, the glimpses of her beautiful, innocent soul seemed to me as glimpses

of that heaven to which our hearts aspire in those better moments, that are the "angel's visits" of our lives.

Well, fate had always been hard on me. Long, long ago, I had decided that for me woman's love was a sealed book, but I had hoped that a child's might be spared me, to cast a little ray of sunshine over my life, to keep my heart from growing quite evil, or quite thankless, or quite hard.

"But it was not to be," I said to myself, and tried to bring my hopes down to the placid level of that philosophical reflection.

If she were only happy—if only across that blank, impenetrable silence some whisper could steal to me, telling of safety, of peace, of content! But no, there was nothing. Not a word or sign, for two long, wasted, wretched years, that seemed to me an eternity.

I woke up at the end of them. Woke, as it seemed to me, with a start and a shudder, but with some degree of calmness at last.

Somewhere I woke, alone, yet not alone. I heard the grand, deep notes of an organ; I was amidst a crowd of people in some great beautiful edifice. The choir sang, the organ pealed, wreaths and garlands of bright green and rich scarlet were twined around lofty pillars. I heard words and many voices, and, finally, one great and glorious clash of pealing bells, and I stood in the heart of the lighted city, and knew that the old, sweet message had reached men's ears and hearts once more. Thank Heaven, it reached mine too!

A cloud seemed to roll from off my brain. A mist cleared from my eyes. I looked out on the fair world, while the Christmas stars shone bright and clear above, and once again I saw it as it was, and had the grace to feel ashamed of the selfish misanthrope who had been so long blind and deaf to its beauty.

I drew a long, deep breath. The solemn music echoed in my ears. The solemn night was full of peace, and holiness, and awe. I trod the streets as one in a dream, but it was a happy dream now. A dream of hope, and courage, and brave and steadfast purpose and new ambitions, and long-dead desires. I walked on and on, till I lost all count of time or heed of way, and then stopping suddenly, with a start, became conscious that

someone was speaking to me—some whining, piteous voice was beseeching charity with the beggar's importunate perseverance. I felt in my pockets for a coin; I gave it into a shaking, skeleton-like hand. I turned a half-compassionate glance on the shivering, ragged figure, and then—— What was it—instinct, repulsion, recognition? Something of all three, perhaps, that drew my eyes to his; that showed me, as if in some dim corner of memory, a likeness——

"Who are you?" I cried instinctively, my hand clutching the grimed and naked arm that showed itself through miserable rags. "Who are you? I know you; I have seen—— Ah!"—my voice broke off. I had my answer. Despite rags, dirt, famine, disease—despite the change of time, I knew him. I saw the frightened look. I heard the low gasp of terror. Strength, health, courage—all these were mine. We were more than equals now. My hand clenched on the quivering flesh, but there was little need for force now. "I know you!" I cried again. At last we have met. Where is the child?"

He was passive in my grasp. His eyes had recognised me also, and for an instant a fierce light glared in their hollow depths.

"The child," he muttered stupidly; "she is safe enough. What do you want with her? 'Twas you who betrayed us, 'twas you who gave me this dog's life to lead. Take care your broken oath does not claim its penalty yet."

I laughed in utter scorn of the bombast.

"That oath," I cried contemptuously. "Pshaw! it does not weigh a featherweight with me. When I took it I deemed you but foolhardy, tempestuous patriots; misjudging, but honest at least to a good cause; but to the swindlers, and thieves, and ruffians I know you to be, no oath binds me. Look here—with this little bit of metal to my lips—I can summon assistance in a moment. I can denounce you as one of that gang for whom the police have been hunting these past two years. I can do this, and will, if you don't confess where is the child whose life you have martyred."

He was silent for a moment. My threat was not an idle one, he knew, and, matched against mine, his strength was only that of a child, so great had been the ravages of famine, and misery, and ruin.

"I will tell you all—everything," he said at last, "if you will promise not to betray me. You know that I, at least, had no hand in that murder, for I was at the door with you when the blow was struck. Give me your word, and suffer me to go my way, and you may see the child within an hour if you please."

My heart beat fast, my head began to whirl. I could not think clearly for the moment. The hope of seeing the child once more banished all thought of prudence.

"Can I trust you to tell me the truth?" I said hoarsely.

"I will take you to her myself," he said with a sneer. "And if you doubt, you may call a policeman to guard you. Tell him you are going to a somewhat dangerous neighbourhood. He will come. I don't fear being recognised. Will you give me your word?"

"Yes," I said, and I replaced the whistle in my breast-pocket. "Trust deserves trust. I will go with you unaccompanied."

He looked at me with a curious smile.

"You are brave," he said. "I warn you, 'tis a bad place, and you—you've got money, I dare say, about you?"

"Yes," I said quietly; "and it shall be yours—every penny, the moment you bring me the child."

"How you think of her!" he said wonderingly. "A poor, blind, helpless bit of a creature like that! Why, her own mother was less mindful of her than you!"

"Don't waste more words," I answered coldly. "You have my promise. Fulfil yours."

He turned away. I followed.

Through what lanes of infamy, and squalor, and misery—by what dens of shame, and sin, and crime, did I not penetrate with my strange guide on that eventful Christmas Eve!

The night was intensely cold. The stars burned with clear and jewel-like flame above in the sky's dark blue.

I thought what contrast could be greater than these unsavory, unsavoury purlieus of poverty and vice below, and the watchful calm of the wide, bright heavens above?

We stopped at last before a mean, wretched-looking hovel; a faint gleam of light showed through the rags that curtained the windows. The man turned to me and pointed upwards to the second storey.

"She is there," he said, and he held out his hand greedily.

I poured into it all my loose money, then without further word I sprang up the rickety, broken stairs, and so to the door of a room, through which a pale and sickly gleam of light fell in uncertain rays.

It stood ajar. I pushed it open and looked in. He had not lied to me; she was there. Yes, she was there, but my heart, that had leapt up in one glad throb of welcome sank back within my breast, heavy and pained, and full of dread as I looked at her.

A change worse than any death seemed to have come over the fair, sweet innocent face. Worn, wintry, pale as any broken-down snowdrop, so it turned in its sightless patience to my own, for my step had reached the quick ears, and I saw her rise and face the doorway where I stood.

For a moment there was silence. She stood with her head a little bent, in the attitude of listening; her pale, thin hands lay clasped on the black folds of her dress.

Then—ah, dear Heaven!—what need to say more, for a light broke over her like sunshine, and I made but one step, and caught her in my arms, and like a broken lily she lay there, silent, senseless, but my own once more.

Oh, my child, my little one, my winter snowdrop, in what net of misery and suffering had your gentle feet been snared? Long, long after I heard the story as I tell it now. Long, long after, when peace had come to the aching heart, and some of the old sweet light had returned to the gentle face.

Long, long after, for a dark and bitter time followed that night of her discovery, and privation and grief told with terrible force upon suffering brain and failing strength.

That day, when the messenger came for her, she pretended to be a friend of her mother's, as I supposed. The story was specious enough.

Her mother had seen her in the street with me, and had sent for her. I was there waiting, and would bring her back.

She was so unsuspecting, so trusting, that a baby might have deceived her. She never hesitated, but went away at once with the messenger, to find, too late, that she had been trapped by the old gang, and lured to the old misery and shame.

Where they took her she did not know—only that old Fleure was there, and that for six months she never even stepped across the threshold of the house, or knew an unwatched movement. A close prisoner she was, and with no hope of escape. Then, one day, Fleure came to her, and told her that her mother had been discovered really, that she was coming back to them that night.

"When I heard that," she said to me brokenly, "I forgot all my sufferings; I was almost happy. And they did not deceive me—she came. I had often rebelled against my loss of sight; I had often prayed and longed that for even one hour I might regain that lost blessing. I did not know that Heaven, in its great mercy, had taken away what would only have added fresh suffering to my life. I heard her voice. I touched her lips. I—I think, if I had seen her, it would have broken my heart. Oh, how often I have told you about her—her beauty, her youth, her happy, careless grace, her sweet looks, that won all hearts. They were all gone—all—all—all! It didn't need sight to tell me that. I think sometimes I suffered more because I could only guess the difference—the wide, sad difference. Her life was over, she said. Hope, love, joy—all things that had been of her, and about her, and dear to her as the sun-light is dear to earth—all had been swept away by one cruel hand—for ever—for ever! I heard her story at long intervals. She said it would be a warning to me, but I don't think I need, or ever should need, such a warning. Men love what is fair, and young, and beautiful of form, and I—I am old in suffering, and blind, and helpless, and but one creature has ever loved me, and she is dead. It seems to me as if I had lived such a long, long time in the world, and that it is so sad and cruel a place! For long it has been to me all cold, and darkness, and fear, and I knew at last that I never could get back to you, for they had me here hard and fast, and the old life of infamy was about me once again. I told my mother of you, and of your goodness, and of that happy time we spent together, and with her last breath she blessed and thanked you for all you had done."

"She is dead, then?" I said softly.

"Yes."

"Don't tell me more," I said. "There is no need. I have found you once more. Do not fear I shall lose you

ever again, my child, if love or care of mine can guard you."

The slow tears filled her eyes as she rested, wan and weak, upon the pillows.

"I am so happy," she sighed ; "so happy ! When I was ill and suffering, I could not weep, but now——"

I would not let her say more, my pretty broken lily, transplanted from that dark and evil soil of infamy and crime—transplanted—oh, I thank Heaven for it!—to blossom purely, sweetly, undisturbed, in the garden of my own heart, in the sunshine of my own great love !

Years after, some more than ordinarily acute members of the force secured the ringleader of that gang of forgers, and by his confession several others of the same crew were brought to justice, and the long-sought-for murderer discovered. Up to that hour, I think my story had always been looked upon with doubt.

The old house in Kilburn was pulled down, and, in company with several others, converted into warehouses. I never heard of their being haunted, though they may be ; for sad, and sinful, and tragic enough is the story that appertains to them.

People express their surprise, sometimes, that I should have married a blind wife. I think some even go the length of pitying me.

Thank Heaven, I have never pitied myself ! No, nor ever shall, while I read the love in my darling's face, and know that to one creature, at least, in the world, my presence brings light, and joy, and gladness, beyond all power of words to express.

Baunted.

CHAPTER I.

AN INTERLOPER.

"What are we to do with him?" exclaimed the Rev. Amos Milroy, and he rubbed his thin grey hair upon end, as was his way when perturbed in spirit, and looked helplessly across the breakfast-table at his wife.

Mrs. Milroy was a meek little woman, cumbered with the care of many olive-branches and small means. Her eyes met those of her lord and master with a bewildered stare that gradually changed into deprecation.

"My dear," she said, "it is impossible. We have more mouths now than we can afford to feed. We can't possibly have him. You must write to these people and tell them so."

The Rev. Amos Milroy smiled grimly.

"I have been appointed guardian, and I cannot well refuse the office," he said, "and you see they offer a hundred a year. It will be no additional expense."

"And where are we to put him?" asked his wife, who had a woman's own gift of raising obstacles in the way of things that, to her, were undesirable. "You know how cramped we are already for room; and the boys won't like it, and what will Opal say to a young savage?"

"He may not be quite that, and Opal will have to get used to him."

"Six boys," sighed Mrs. Milroy. "Oh, dear! If it had been a girl now——"

Her husband smiled faintly; he was accustomed to her laments, and generally ignored them. He laid down the letter which had been the subject of these remarks, and rose from the scantily-appointed breakfast-table.

"You must do your best," he said quietly. "He is on his way by this time, and may arrive at any moment. He can share Harold's room, and if you need a few extra things—you can get them from N——. I can spare you two

or three pounds. A little chintz and muslin and some new ware will make the bed-chamber quite presentable under your clever management."

The door closed on the bent, shabby figure, and his wife's eyes followed him somewhat wistfully.

"Two or three pounds," she murmured, "and he does so want a new warm overcoat. Could I manage it, I wonder?"

The thought of bargaining and contriving brought a faint colour to her worn and faded face. She rose and took the letter, and then went to the window overlooking the neglected garden. The children were playing there. Five great, noisy, boisterous boys and one girl, their sister.

The mother's eyes looked out on them with more of wistfulness than pride—seeing the shabby darned clothes, the torn hats, the worn-out boots, and taking more note of them than of the rosy, handsome faces, and blithe, strong young forms, which bespoke abundant health and strength.

"I had better tell them," she said, and taking up a shawl which Opal had knitted for her, she put it over her head, and went out into the chill autumn air.

The children were round her in a minute. Opal, a girl of some thirteen or fourteen years, with a face like a spring morning, it was so fresh, and fair, and sunny, linked her arm in her mother's, and impetuously demanded the news.

"Is it the letter?" she asked quickly. "Yes, of course it is. Has some one left us a fortune?"

"Has the bishop remembered father at last?" asked Tom, the eldest of the six.

"This letter is from abroad," said their mother. "From the lawyers of your Uncle Sebastian. He is dead."

"They do not want us to go into mourning, do they?" said Tom.

"Bosh! when we've never seen him, or he us," cried Bertie, who was the youngest of the boys, and the special favourite of his sister Opal.

"Do let mother speak!" cried Edgar impatiently. "What's the use of guessing when we can hear the real facts at once?"

"You see, my dears," resumed Mrs. Milroy, "your Uncle Sebastian went out to Spain when he was quite a lad, and your father and he have never met since. He married there, but his wife died long ago, and now he, too,

is dead, and he has left an only child—a son. This son he wishes your father to educate and bring up. He has been very much indulged—he is very ignorant—and when he is twenty-one he is to come into a fortune of thirty thousand pounds. That is the story we hear of him, and the boy himself is on his way, and may arrive at any moment. Your father wishes me to prepare you all for this new companion, and hopes you will welcome him kindly. Of course he will feel very strange and lonely, but——” She stopped abruptly.

There was an ominous cloud on the six bright faces. The news had evidently not pleased them.

“What a nuisance!” “Disgusting!” “The idea of another fellow coming here.” “Why couldn’t Uncle Sebastian leave the young savage in his own country?”

These remarks fell low, like muttered thunder, from the various mouths.

Opal only was silent. She was looking at her mother’s face.

“Will it be any help to you? Will they pay?” she asked softly.

“Yes,” said Mrs. Milroy, colouring, as if half-ashamed of the one welcome item in the news. “They are to pay a hundred a year.”

“Well, that’s good,” said Opal emphatically. “At least it will provide his food.”

“He’ll only want oil and garlic,” interposed Tom loftily. “You had better look up some Spanish messes in the cookery-book, Opal.”

“I wonder how he’ll be dressed?” said Bertie. “Don’t they wear sombreros and knee-breeches out there?”

“You haven’t told us his name,” said Opal curiously.

“Alfonso, or Pedro, or José, of course,” said Edgar. “I suppose he’ll carry a dagger in his belt—or sash, whichever he wears—and give us a gentle reminder of his Spanish blood every time we disagree.”

“His name,” said the mother, when her voice could be once more audible, “is Ruiz. And I hope, my dears, you won’t disagree, for after all he is your cousin, and your father’s only living relative. Besides, you must remember he is an orphan, and we should all try our best to make him feel at home with us. And now I am going into N—— to make some purchases, so I trust you won’t get into any

mischief. I may not be home till tea-time, and if by any chance your cousin should arrive, I must trust you to show him all kindness and attention."

"Where's he to sleep?" asked Opal.

"In Harold's room. I am going to make a few additions to it. It is woefully shabby; still, it's the best of the bedrooms," sighed the harassed woman. "And we must make it do. Perhaps your cousin won't be very particular."

She moved away then, and went back to the house to give her orders. Opal slowly followed. The boys lingered a few moments to discuss the advent of the new cousin, and then went to their father's study for the morning lessons that were the torment and delight of his life. Torment, because of the wild spirit and insubordination of the young crew; delight, because teaching was really a pleasure to him, and his mind was as gifted and intelligent as it was gentle and patient. The morning hours were always devoted by him to teaching his children; indeed, there was no other prospect of education for them except what he could bestow. The town of N—— was far away, and schools there were expensive as well as unsatisfactory. It was his great ambition that Tom, his eldest son, should go to Oxford; but that idea looked very impossible, and very far off; indeed, insufficient finances stood as a bug-bear to most of the family's ambitions or desires, for the Rev. Amos Milroy was only the rector of a small and poor parish in a remote district of Lincolnshire.

Opal usually shared her brothers' studies. Indeed, she was nearly as good a Latin scholar as Tom, and better at Greek than Edgar; the boys themselves acknowledged that at English literature none of them "were a patch on her," which was high praise in their phraseology. This morning, however, as her mother was going to the town, Opal took the household duties off her hands. That is to say, she dusted the rooms, and gave out the stores, and helped the one servant of the household in preparing the early dinner. When that meal was over and her father had departed on his parish rounds, and the boys started off with wild whoops on an expedition of their own, she put on her hat, and went out for one of the lonely rambles in which she delighted.

The roads and lanes were already wearing that look of

melancholy and desolation which Nature puts on at the fall of the leaf.

The tints of autumn had changed into its season of decay and desolation—that season of grey sky and bare trees, of dull mists and sodden leafage, when it is difficult to feel bright or hopeful, or out of harmony with one's dismal surroundings.

There had been a great deal of rain, and the low-lying grounds for miles around were more like marshes than anything else. But Opal did not mind weather. She flitted along through the dreary lanes, and shook off the withered leaves as they showered themselves on her bright hair, with a smile that might have repaid them for their trouble.

A walk of two miles brought Opal to her destination. She was then outside a low and broken stone wall, so thickly covered with ivy and creepers, and surrounded by underwood of all descriptions, that it was hardly more than outlined.

This wall was the boundary of Chalford Hall, or, as it was mostly called, the Old Hall, and from the rising ground where the girl stood, the beautiful, half-ruined building was distinctly visible.

Beautiful it was still, despite the ravages of time and the cruelty of neglect and desolation. It was a grey old Gothic building with lancet windows, pointed gables, and carved buttresses, and it stood in a park of vast extent, that was now a mere wilderness of trees, and tangled grass, and briars, and wild trailing ivy.

At a short distance from the wall by which Opal had halted was a small iron gate. It was broken, and hung on but one hinge, and the pillars too had fallen and crumbled into that same semblance of decay which made everyone call the Old Hall a ruin. On the inner side of the gate a great oak stood; it had been blasted by a lightning-stroke some score of years before, so the villagers said, and yet it stood firmly there—naked, leafless, with outstretched boughs, like skeleton arms that seemed to extend themselves threateningly over the portals it guarded. On the outer side was a small, deep pool, fringed by reeds and rushes, and with the trailing leaves of hidden water-lilies floating over its dark surface. By the side of the pool was a solitary heron.

Opal knew the bird quite well, and used to bring fragments of bread to feed it with. She used to wonder if it ever stirred from that spot. She never came there without seeing it, the only living thing among the general loneliness and desolation.

The Old Hall was burdened with a host of traditions, and not a few crimes. From time immemorial the lords of Chalford had been cruel, evil-living, and spendthrifts. Every generation had but added more debts, and wrung more money out of their inheritance, until at last the place stood as it stood now, a gloomy indication of fallen fortunes, and a byword of neglect and shame.

Some said it was in Chancery, some that it was mortgaged to ten times its value, but all that was known of it was that it was tenanted by one solitary and uncanny being, a man full three-score years of age, an ill-conditioned, morose recluse, who had dwelt there for many years, seeing no one, going nowhere, existing people scarce knew how, occupied, it was whispered, with strange and diabolical pursuits.

Rumour is many-tongued, and what it gathers from one source is filtered through so many, that the last account bears little resemblance to the first; so the stories told of the inmate of Chalford Hall were many and strange. Opal had heard some of them, but she paid little heed—as little as she did to the ghostly legends of the Old Hall itself.

She had been used to go there from quite a child. She thought now, as she stood gazing at the dreary old building in the dusk of the autumn afternoon, of how often she had crept through those broken iron rails, or climbed the ruined wall, and wandered through the vast old pleasure, or over the moss-grown paths, where the rabbits flitted by, and the wild game whirled and flew across her feet.

She had never met a living thing beside the animals and birds, and had grown to disbelieve the tale of the solitary inhabitant.

Often, too, she had wandered through the ruined portion of the Hall, and looked out through the windows of the haunted chamber; but in all these expeditions she had invariably been alone, for—though she could not have explained why—a strange disinclination had always been with her to introduce that noisy, boisterous crew of brothers to the weird solitude and mystery of this deserted place.

In Opal's nature there was a strange mingling of lightness and mysticism, reason and romance. Not even those who loved the girl best could have understood this inner part, as it were, of her nature. The stories of the Old Hall and its mystic legend had always impressed her greatly, but she never said so, and, indeed, rather shunned the subject if any chance remark led to its discussion. What she loved best was to come here by herself, to wander through the desolate rooms, or the great wilderness of the garden and park, and invent histories of the dead-and-gone Chalfords, or dream over the romantic episodes of their lives.

It seemed so sad to her that not one of the family remained—that the beautiful, stately old pile had passed into strange hands, and no one heeded its decay. It had never looked more melancholy and dreary than it did now, with the chill mists rising like faint vapour from the damp ground, and the dull grey sky brooding over the leafless trees and rotting stonework. The girl stood by the heron-pool, and rested her arms on the broken wall, and, leaning there, gave herself up to the luxury of thought so often denied her in the noisy and care-encumbered household at home.

She must have stood there for a long time—how long, indeed, she scarcely knew, only that the faint, dull daylight had deepened into dusk, and the sky grown more colourless and the wind more chill.

Then she roused herself with a start, and remembered that she had two miles to walk before she could reach her home. As she looked up, she saw, standing some few paces off, a solitary figure. The sight was so unusual a one in this lonely spot that it was little wonder she started. But the start was one of surprise, not fear. The figure was a strange one—that of a youth dressed in most un-English garb, with a wide, drooping hat which half concealed his face.

She stared at him in unfeigned astonishment, and he returned the look. She saw a tall, slender figure, a pale face, lighted by large pathetic eyes, sombre as night, yet with a strange light in their depths, and a beautiful mouth, curved, and mobile, and eloquent of feeling. Dark soft hair of richest brown framed in this strange unyouthful face—hair tossed carelessly from the low broad brow, and far too long and negligently worn for English taste.

The one thing, however, that impressed the girl was the extreme mournfulness of the whole expression. Sadness

haunted the dark, long-fringed eyes, and had drawn the curved mouth into pathetic lines, and set a seal of tragic meaning upon the brow; and it was this sadness which struck her most and gave her courage to address the stranger.

"Do you wish to go into the Hall?" she asked gently. "I believe you can do so. It is not inhabited."

He looked at her curiously, then lifted his hat, and said in slow, grave tones:

"No, I have no wish to go there. I only came here for a walk."

"Do you live in North Apse?" asked Opal in surprise. "I thought I knew everyone here."

"I have come to live here," he said in the same slow, measured accents, "at the rectory. When I found it, no one was there. I suppose I was not expected. I left my luggage and came out. The first road I found led me here. I have been watching you for a long time. Is that," pointing to the Hall, "where you live?"

"Oh, no," said Opal quickly; "I live at the rectory. Perhaps you are our new cousin. Is your name Ruiz Milroy?"

"Ruiz Sebastian Milroy," he answered calmly. "And you?"

"I am Opal," she said simply, and gave him her hand.

He took it in the same cold, grave way, and his mournful eyes looked steadily down at her own.

"I never heard of you," he said. "I wonder if I shall like you."

Opal coloured slightly.

"I hope so," she said. "I am sorry we were all out when you arrived. We did not expect you so soon. Had you a pleasant journey?"

"Pleasant!" His eyes flashed, his lips expressed the utmost contempt. "No; nothing is pleasant here. What an ugly, hateful country you live in!"

Opal looked up indignantly.

"I am sure it is not," she exclaimed. "It is beautiful! Of course, at this time of the year everything looks dreary; but I suppose it is not always summer even in Spain."

"Spain is lovely!" he said in a tone of intense regret. "I don't know how you can live under such grey skies, and with such horrible air as this to breathe. And have

you no flowers or fruit? Is it all like this; wet, marshy, flat? Ugh!" And he shivered visibly.

"Of course there are flowers and fruit at the proper time," said Opal indignantly. "I suppose you are cold and hungry, and that is why you are bad-tempered.

"I am not bad-tempered," said the youth hotly, "and even if you are my cousin, I think you are very rude to call me so. I have the sun in my veins, and I know I shall hate this land of fog, and rains, and bleak cold days. My mother told me it would be so, and that English girls were bold and rude, and not like our Spanish maidens. She was quite right."

Opal looked at him with the blood mantling in her cheeks.

"Your mother could not have known anything of England, for she was never here, and as for Spanish girls, they are bold enough in some things, if they are kept in convents and never allowed to look at a man without a veil over their faces. You see I know quite as much about your country as you do about mine."

He smiled with a somewhat lofty air of superiority; but Opal saw the smile, and it incensed her greatly.

"You are a funny little girl," he said coolly. "Come, don't let us talk here any more; it is cold. Show me the way home."

"If I am a little girl," said Opal with cutting politeness, "I am at least accustomed to civility. Say 'if you please.'"

For a moment he looked at her, and she returned the look. Blue eyes and brown flashed defiance, rebellion, wrath at each other, as only young indignant eyes can do. Then something in the girl's clear violet orbs seemed to thrill and master him. A dark flush rose slowly to his brow. He raised his hat with consummate grace, and bent half seriously, half mockingly towards her. "If you please, cousin," he said.

She laughed and flushed too, and then turned away with a little air of conscious victory.

"Come, then; it will be quite dark if we do not make haste."

CHAPTER II.

"TO-DAY IT IS MY TURN."

ON the whole the new comer was not popular with his young cousins.

Youth is always more or less antagonistic to innovations, and Ruiz Milroy was certainly entirely different in thought, word, and manner to themselves, and utterly unable to suit himself to the gloom of their everyday life. He disliked study—was too indolent by nature for any physical exertion and regarded their rough sports and games with the utmost scorn and horror. Then he had been accustomed to have his own way entirely, and being an only child was quite incapable of understanding the boisterous good-nature and "give-and-take" morals of the rectory boys.

The only one for whom he showed any regard was Opal, but that favour lost its value in her sight from the fact of the rooted antagonism that existed between this strange cousin and her favourite brother, Bertie.

From the first Bertie took a dislike to him. He was a bold bright boy of ten, gifted with immense physical strength, unflagging spirits, an invincible fancy for practical jokes, and a passionate love for his sister Opal. That this Spanish interloper, as he named Ruiz, should attempt to come between her and himself was more than he could bear, and he made Opal miserable with jealous reproaches, and infuriated the fiery-tempered Ruiz with sneers and taunts.

The rector did not see much of what went on between the young folks. He thought that no doubt Ruiz would shake down in time and become used to English ways, and he felt rather despairing when he discovered how very backward his education was, and what a difficult subject he seemed for instruction or control.

As for Mrs. Milroy she troubled herself very little about the boy. In fact she was rather afraid of him, if the truth be told. Afraid of his great sombre eyes that looked such a world of tragic meaning—of his abrupt curt manners, his very outspoken denunciations, for Ruiz never thought twice about saying what he felt, and had an uncomfortable knack of blurting out truths with an utter disregard as to whose feelings or opinions he offended.

So for the first three months of his stay the boy was very miserable, and the family very uncomfortable.

As for Ruiz, he hated England. He hated the climate, the bleak grey skies, the chilly weather, the rules and regulations of the household, the long hours of lessons, the boisterous play, and the incessant quizzing and tormenting of the boys. He was out of place, and he felt it. No one understood him, no one cared for him, and his proud, passionate nature held such an inward craving for love that to live in this unsympathetic atmosphere was to him an endless purgatory.

To one only of these new companions could Ruiz Milroy have spoken of his feelings, or betrayed something of the heart-hunger that consumed him, and that one was Opal. But Opal was cold too, and seemed to shun him, for Bertie hated him. Yet at times he caught the girl's eyes fixed on him with a sort of wondering gentleness, and even in his most wild and passionate outbursts, a look or word from her would calm him.

To show himself less ignorant in her sight, he worked hard at his hated task, and tried to set his aching and bewildered brain to the comprehension of Latin verbs and Greek hexameters, and all the terrible turmoil of figures and calculations comprised in that one odious word, arithmetic.

The boys laughed at him and his blunders, but Opal never did, and many a difficulty did she smooth away by her clear and simple explanations, or gentle hints. To him she seemed a marvel of cleverness. He only wondered how she could find delight in her brother's rough companionship or wild games.

Sometimes, but very rarely, he would find her alone, and coax her to go for a ramble with him; but as the winter grew more bleak and bitter, he gave up going out at all, and so saw less and less of the girl.

One day he was standing in the cheerless, unfurnished play-room, looking out of the window at the frozen ground and glittering icicles, when Bertie dashed into the room.

"Hallo, Mollycoddle!" he cried boisterously; "aren't you coming out? We're going to skate."

"What is that?" asked Ruiz, without moving from the window.

Bertie laughed uproariously.

"Oh, you are a ninny!" he said. "Come and see; but I suppose you're afraid of catching cold, or getting your nose frost-bitten, or something of that sort. Shall I lend you a blanket?"

For all answer, his cousin turned round, his eyes blazing, his face white as death.

"I hate you!" he cried fiercely. "What right have you to sneer at me, or what I do? You are nothing but a set of boors and farmers. You don't understand how gentlemen live."

"Don't I, Miss Petticoats?" persisted Bert irritably. "Perhaps I do. Gentlemen here don't lounge about on sofas, and drawl poetry and play guitars; they are a bit more manly than you namby-pamby Spaniards. And as for sport, you don't know anything about it, except bull-fights, and they're only fit for barbarians. If all Spaniards are like you, they're nothing but a set of old women."

Further words on his part were rendered impossible by reason of a violent blow that sent him reeling against the doorway. Ruiz had snatched up a heavy book and hurled it at the audacious young speaker. The moment Bert recovered himself, he flew like a young tiger at his cousin. Ruiz was cooler now, and met the onslaught with a simple defence. At this juncture the door opened, and Opal entered.

She gave a cry of horror, and flew towards the combatants. Ruiz instantly drew back, and she held Bert by main force.

"You coward!" she cried, facing her cousin indignantly. "The idea of your striking a child like that! I wonder you're not ashamed of yourself."

"Let me go!" cried Bert furiously. "It's the first time he's shown any pluck. I'm not afraid to fight him."

"You sha'n't fight him," cried Opal passionately. "It's hateful, horrible! I wish you had never come here," she continued, stamping her foot and turning again to Ruiz. "We have no peace, night or day now. Why can't you be like we are, and not for ever quarrelling and setting us all by the ears?"

"I am glad I am not like you are," said Ruiz with suppressed passion. "I wouldn't be if I could. And you can't be more sorry to have me than I to be here. I am most miserable."

The proud, defiant look in his eyes died out, and in its place came one so heart-breaking, so pathetic, that a swift pang shot through Opal's tender breast.

She still stood there holding her brother's collar, her slight young figure drawn up to its full height, her whole face eloquent of anger and reproach; but at those words her hand relaxed its grasp, the colour faded slowly from her cheeks.

"Bert," she said reproachfully, "you have been tormenting him again. It is not kind of you. He is our guest, you know, and we ought not to make him unhappy."

The boy pouted and shook himself free from her detaining hand.

"He is so ill-tempered, and he can't stand chaff," he said pettishly. "Besides, he began it—he threw a book at me."

"I am sure you are sorry," said Opal, turning to her cousin. "Shake hands and be friends again, won't you?"

"He must beg my pardon," said Bertie, defiantly, as he put his hands behind him.

"I shall do no such thing," said Ruiz haughtily. "You insulted me. It is for you to beg mine."

Opal came and laid her hand on his arm.

"You are so much older," she said gently, "and you know you really are bad-tempered, I have always told you so. Beg his pardon just to please me."

"It will be a lie, and I shall not mean it," muttered Ruiz, his eyes flashing fire once more.

"It won't be a—ahem!" said Opal, smiling up in his angry face, "if you try and think you mean it—and to please me."

He hesitated. He met her eyes, and he thought of that day when she had first vanquished his pride and stubbornness, and she thought of it too. With a sudden flame of hot anger he wrenched himself away.

"No," he said passionately; "once before you conquered me; to-day it is my turn. At least my will is my own!"

"Oh, very well," said Opal haughtily. "Do as you like, but remember—in offending Bert you have offended me, and I don't forgive you until you say what I asked."

And she turned away like a young queen, and marched Bertie off with her.

Ruiz stood where she had left him, till the last echo of her retreating steps had died into silence. His chest was heaving, his eyes were on fire with wrath and hate and passionate misery. The silence around him seemed full of fiendish voices mocking his sorrow and his loneliness. Everything in life was a blank, save the hatred and anger tearing at his soul. He felt a loathing of all mankind—a hatred of these young, mirthful, undisciplined creatures, who comprehended him as little as he did them. His brain seemed on fire, he clenched his hand and cursed the fate that had brought him thither. Then he rushed from the room, snatched up his hat from the hall-table, and went out into the cold, frosty, sunless air, with all his soul in a tumult of rage, and the blood coursing like a stream of fire in his throbbing veins. He felt nothing of the cold—saw nothing of where his furious footsteps led him. His feeling then was that he would rather be devoured by wolves and bears than go back to that hateful house, and hear the boy's sneers and jokes, and see the proud contempt of Opal's eyes. He had never felt so utterly alone and uncared-for as he felt now. The feverish love and tenacious loyalty he had for his dead parents and his lost home were things that only met with ridicule and misapprehension.

Opal was his only friend, and now she had turned against him. She would never forgive him, and that thought maddened him and made him desperate. He never ceased his headlong flight until he found himself at the spot where he had first met her. The ruined Hall towered dim and spectral in the wintry sunlight; the leafless trees glistened with sparkling crystals; the heron stood beside the frozen pool and uttered a low and plaintive cry; and the gate hung open on its broken hinges and showed the desolate park beyond.

He hesitated a moment, then the desire for solitude—for isolation—came over him like a resistless flood. He entered, pushing aside the broken gate, and turned off into the very depths of the desolate winter woods. Once there, and safe from human intrusion, he threw himself down on the cold, hard ground, and buried his face in his hands, the hoarse, shuddering sobs breaking from him, sounding inexpressibly mournful in that dreary solitude. There he lay quite still, battling with the storm of passion in his breast, undergoing such mortal agony, shame, and self-

reproach as would have gone nigh to break the heart of one who loved him, as that mother for whom he wept had done.

CHAPTER III.

"LET ME BE YOUR FRIEND."

THE boy—for despite his sixteen years and tall stature he was little else—lay there in that wild abandonment of grief for a long, long time.

A touch on his shoulder at last recalled him to himself. He sprang up, and saw standing beside him a strange-looking object. It was the figure of an old man, lean and bent, with snowy hair and beard, and wild, gleaming eyes that looked fiercely forth from beneath thick, shaggy eyebrows.

He was very old, and leaned heavily on a thick, stout staff.

"Why are you here?" he asked Ruiz fiercely. "Have you come to spy on me?"

The lad drew himself up indignantly.

"No," he said. "I came because—because I wanted to be alone."

The old man looked at him curiously.

"You are over-young to shun your species," he said.

"What fault have you to find with mankind?"

Ruiz coloured hotly.

"My troubles concern only myself," he said with his usual abrupt truthfulness.

A grim smile crossed the lips of his questioner. That curt haughty grace pleased him. It was unconscious, and it had a kinship to his own contempt and indifference for his species.

"That is true, or at least you fancy it is true," he said.

"But you are rather ungracious. Are you aware you are trespassing?"

"No," said Ruiz calmly, as he glanced around. "I thought these woods were free to any one. If you wish to keep them to yourself you should bar and guard their entrance better than you do."

"You are very outspoken," said the old man. "What is your name? You are not of this country, I am sure."

"I am a Spaniard," said the boy haughtily. "We do not ask people in my country who and what they are the

moment we see them. Since you say I am trespassing, I will leave this place. I did not know I was doing wrong."

"Not wrong—only the rights of landowners are somewhat rigidly enforced here, whatever they may be in Spain. You are a strange youth, but you have a face one can trust. I wish you to say nothing about me. It is my whim that no one should know I live here."

"I am not used to talk of the affairs of other people," answered Ruiz. "I shall say nothing of you."

"That is well," said the old man. "What, are you going?"

"Did you not say I had no right here?"

"You are too quick at taking one at one's word. You may stay if it pleases you."

"No," said the boy, with a faint sigh as he looked over the frozen landscape and up to the icicle-hung trees. "I must go now. It is late."

"When will you come again?" asked the old man.

"To trespass? Never!"

"Nay. If I ask you, it is no longer a trespass. You may come when you choose, but—alone. Since you love solitude it is hard to debar you from your singular taste. I am an old man, and poor, and sick of life, and I hate all my kind, and live but for one object. You see, I tell you this, I who for years have spoken to no living thing. I tell it you because in your face I read the war of those fierce passions that ruined my own life. Beware of them if you can. Perhaps, though, they may be stronger than yourself. In that case recognise in my fate the semblance of your own. Do you know what they say of yonder place?"

His withered hand pointed towards the lonely Gothic pile, with the last sun-rays gleaming blood-red on its lancet windows and arched gables. The boy's eyes followed his gesture, a little startled by the strange manner and stranger words of this recluse.

"They say it is haunted," continued the old man. "Haunted. They are right. It is. Haunted by evil deeds—haunted by sad and bitter memories—haunted by one living soul whose days are weighted with the memory of a crime no after regret can expiate. Do you understand, and will you shun me now?"

"I do not understand," said Ruiz with simple directness. "But I will not shun you if you desire to speak with me at

any time. It must be very sad to live unloved, and desolate, and alone."

"There is nothing in life sadder," said the old man, and his head drooped on his breast, and the hands that clasped the supporting staff shook visibly. "Go, boy," he continued wildly, "go. I have spoken to no living being for years. I cannot tell what made me speak to you. You are young, and the sorrows of youth are short-lived, and doubtless life looks to you fair and full of promise. It is only the old who look forward and see—nothing; and backward on years that are like a graveyard of regrets. Heaven keep you from a fate like mine!"

Ruiz looked compassionately at him. Beside this grey and colourless existence his own youth seemed less supremely desolate than an hour before he had thought it.

He stretched out his hand.

"Good-bye," he said gently, "I am sorry for you, if your life be what you say. And I will come and see you again, if it is your wish, or can be any pleasure to you."

"Yes, come again," said the old man eagerly. Then his eyes clouded. "You are young," he said; "you will forget. Give me your promise ere you leave."

Ruiz drew his tall young figure up haughtily.

"I never broke faith with living or with dead," he said. "A bond that needs compelling is broken already. I have said I will come."

He raised his hat with that reverence which age and womanhood always inspired in him, and went his way homeward over the frozen ground, followed by the musing sorrowful eyes of the old Hall's lonely tenant.

They were all at tea when he returned. He went up to his room, and plunged his face in cold water to remove the traces of those passionate tears he had shed, and then calm and proud-looking as a young king, he marched into the fire-lit parlour. There was a momentary silence as he entered. All eyes turned to him. The Rev. Amos thought involuntarily, "What a noble-looking lad!" His wife felt a momentary wonder that the bright flushed faces around the board should suddenly seem so commonplace and coarse before the classic features and tragic beauty of this foreign youth. Opal glanced at him and thought how grand and proud he looked, and the boys contented them-

selves with a contemptuous glance, and a muttered "womanish," which was all the admiration they ever bestowed on that slender, well-knit figure and graceful bearing.

"You are late, my dear," said Mrs. Milroy kindly, as she handed him his tea.

"I went for a long walk," he said curtly.

"Did you find it very cold?" asked the rector. The boys tittered at the question.

Opal glancing up saw how pale he was, and how heavy were the drooping lids that fell over his dark sombre eyes. A swift flood of compassion stirred her heart. She felt she had behaved cruelly and ungenerously to the lonely boy—she who understood him best, and for whom alone he had seemed to care in this household of strangers.

"It was cold," he said, answering his uncle's question after a fiery glance at the mocking faces of the boys; "it is always that here."

"Well, well," said the Rev. Amos cheerfully, "the winter will soon be over now. We are getting near Christmas, when the days begin to lengthen, and sometimes in February we have quite mild weather—violets and crocuses all in bloom. You will like England better when you see the spring."

"I shall never like it," said Ruiz ungraciously. "As soon as ever I am able I shall leave it and go back to Spain."

"A good riddance," muttered Bert below his breath.

Opal gave him a rebuking glance.

"Perhaps you will change your mind," she said graciously to her cousin. "You might at least give England a fair trial."

He looked at her, but said nothing, and the meal went on as noisily as it had done before his advent—no one taking any further notice of him.

When the tea-things had been removed, the boys all retired to prepare their studies for the next day. Ruiz followed them, and when they were alone he went up to Bertie and laid his hand on his shoulder.

"I am sorry for what I did this afternoon," he said simply. "Your sister was right. It was cowardly, but then you provoked me."

"Oh," said Bertie loftily, "it's of no consequence. I'm

not afraid to fight you, and I'd soon have shown you that if Opal hadn't interfered."

"Bertie!" cried his sister indignantly, as she overheard the colloquy, "I am ashamed of you. Take his hand and say you're sorry too. No doubt you were as much in fault as he was."

"That's just like a girl," scoffed Bertie indignantly. "Turncoats! Never know their own minds. First on one side, then on another."

"I can't understand half you say," said Ruiz wearily. "I've told you I'm sorry. I suppose you don't care. You are all very rude and very unkind. But it does not matter. I must live here until I am old enough to have my money and do as I like. Then I shall go to people whom I can understand, and who love me."

"Till then," said a soft, shy voice, "let me be your friend. You are right, Ruiz. We have been rude and cold, and you must have felt disgusted often and often. I have told the boys so, but they don't care, and they can't change. Never mind. I will do what I can for you, and I will be your sister, too, if you will let me."

The boys stared in amazement and felt a little indignant as well as ashamed, but Ruiz looked at her with all his passionate southern soul in his eyes; with such a storm of gratitude, wonder, admiration raging in his fiery young heart as it was well for her she could not read, or he explain.

"Thank you," he said.

That was all. But more words have expressed less fidelity and more eloquent sentences a devotion not half so pure and perfect as the boy laid at the girl's feet in that one short moment of mutual comprehension.

CHAPTER IV.

STRUCK DOWN.

THERE was a time of peace at the rectory after this little episode. The boys troubled Ruiz less, though Bertie was still antagonistic and grudged his cousin his monopoly of Opal's company.

To please her Ruiz tried to skate, though he disliked it. but for Opal's sake he would have done anything, and it was almost touching to see how he subdued his wild will

and fiery temper, and put aside his own feelings and inclinations, and bent to her wishes with a half-proud, half-regretful complaisance.

Christmas Eve came round, and the existing harmony had not been disturbed. Ruiz had helped Opal to decorate the old church, and pricked his fingers, and spoilt his picturesque velvet coat with bunches of holly and evergreens, and otherwise martyred himself in her service.

The boys had been skating and when they came round in the dusk of the afternoon, they found the decoration completed, and Opal scolded them for their selfishness. Bertie, who was inclined to be sulky, retorted sharply, and told her that as Ruiz was always dangling after her, they knew they were not wanted. This offended Opal, and led to an interchange of words between herself and her favourite brother.

They all left the church together, but the boys insisted on having another skate before going home to tea, and Opal and Ruiz accompanied them to the large pond, where they usually disported themselves. Ruiz had his skates with him, but declined going on the ice, and Bertie made this an excuse for further jeers and rudeness.

His cousin took no notice of him for some time, but at last, irritated beyond endurance, he put on his skates, and challenged him to a race. Bertie refused, and went on cutting figures and doing spread-eagles and outside curves, while he sneered at his cousin's want of proficiency. Opal sauntered on, and as soon as she was out of hearing, Bertie turned to his cousin and said firmly :

"Look here, I can't stand this sort of thing any longer. I won't have you coming between my sister and me, so just remember that. She's not like the same girl now, and you're a sneak for turning her against us, and so I tell you. And I'd be ashamed if I were you, to have a girl teaching me to skate, and always be at her heels. You've come here where nobody wanted you, and I suppose we've got to put up with your company ; but take my advice and let Opal alone, or it'll be the worse for you. I'm not going to have any sneaking Spaniards turning my sister's head, and making a ninny and spoon of her ! So just you mind what I say. And if you don't like it, you can do the other thing ! "

For a moment Ruiz stood there and stared at him as if

bewildered. Then a scarlet flush came into his clear, olive cheek, and an ominous flash leapt into his eyes.

"You are an ignorant, insolent little boy," he said in a low, suppressed voice; "and I shall behave to your sister exactly as I please."

"No, you shan't, for I'll tell Tom, and as he's as old as you he can fight you and thrash you till you promise what I've asked."

"Bah!" muttered Ruiz with contempt, "you are nothing but a nation of prize-fighters, you English. It is all you think of, fight—fight; that and money-grubbing!"

"And you're nothing but a set of cowards — you Spaniards!" hissed Bertie, as his cousin moved slowly away. "And all you can do is to shelter yourself behind a woman's petticoats, or knife people in the dark."

"You know nothing about my country or my people," said Ruiz, halting, and trying to keep down the rage surging in his heart. "If you did you would know that they can behave like gentlemen even to strangers who claim their hospitality; but you—you are like your own bulldogs—as jealous, and as brutal, and as fond of fighting."

He was skating on again, only anxious to avoid further dispute, but Bertie crossed his path purposely, and they came into collision. Ruiz was not yet sufficiently sure of his balance to withstand the shock, and fell backwards, striking his head on the ice. The blow almost stunned him, but he struggled to his feet though his brain was giddy and confused, and a thousand lights seemed whirling before his eyes. Bert's mocking laugh fell on his ear and maddened him.

He saw the light young figure gliding by, and made a sudden spring, and seizing him by the collar shook him violently. Bertie raised his fist and hit his cousin full in the face.

Then—how, Ruiz could never tell—it seemed as if his grasp relaxed. There was a dull thud, and the boy fell heavily down, and lay there at his feet like a log.

He was not conscious of having struck him, he had only let him go as that fierce blow was struck; but all the clear wintry air seemed suddenly to gleam like blood, and a wild shriek echoed across the frozen stillness:

"Oh, God, you have killed him!"

It was Opal's voice, and Opal's slight figure threw itself

between him and that still and prostrate form. Then other voices sounded, and other figures pushed him aside, and he could only stand there stunned and bewildered, with his temples throbbing like hammers, and in his heart an agony of fear.

"Dead! Is he dead?" that was all he heard, and mingled with the dreadful words came Opal's sobs of terror, every one of which was like a knife thrust in his heart. Then they raised that motionless form and moved away; none of them speaking to him, none of them pitying him, or even conscious of the agony of remorse and terror that held his senses strained to the utmost tension compatible with consciousness.

He stood there alone on the cold glistening ice; wishing it would open and let the chill waters swallow him; wishing he had never come to this peaceful home, where he had been only an element of discord and antagonism from the first. Then suddenly a strange thought came to him. Why should he go back? Everyone hated him, and now—now they would say he was a murderer. Opal had said it, and thrust him aside with a look of horror.

He would leave Lincolnshire, he would leave England. He would make his way to Liverpool, and work his passage out to Spain if need be. That would be better than living among kinsfolk so unfeeling as these. Yes, he would do that. They should never be troubled with him more.

His brain was still giddy and confused from that blow he had received. He could not think clearly or rationally—only all life seemed suddenly a blank and a desolation.

Scarce knowing what he did, he tore off his skates, and rushed blindly away from the spot—on—on—on, while the night fell in darker shadow, and the white ground and frozen boughs seemed to gleam before his eyes with a dark stain upon their whiteness, and in his ears a thousand fiendish voices seemed shrieking Opal's terrified words:

"You have killed him!"

CHAPTER V.

TWO CHRISTMAS EVES.

"Just four years ago," sighed Opal Milroy, standing in the old church porch, and looking out at the red, wintry sunset.

She was a slender, beautiful girl now, with something of graver and more thoughtful meaning in the face that had been so bright and sunny.

She closed the door behind her, and left the keys with the old sexton, who was waiting by the gate, and then walked slowly and thoughtfully on to that spot where every Christmas Eve found her.

There was no ice on the pond this year, for the season had been mild and rainy, and the meadows were a sheet of water, and the lanes only sloughs of mud. The pond, with its banks fringed with willows and its dark unruffled surface, looked a desolate picture set in among those reedy marshes and watery fields.

Opal shivered involuntarily as she stood there and looked across it. It was always solitary, save when the frost king had bound it in his icy fetters and the skaters came to hold their revels there.

Far as she could see there was no living creature visible except herself, and the intense stillness struck her with a strange chill. It had been her home for eighteen years—it might possibly be her home for all her life, and the idea came to her to-day as it had never come before, with a sudden pang of distaste, and almost of horror.

The pulses of youth and vitality beat in her veins as the young sap thrills in the trees. She wanted to live her life, not stagnate; to drink in beauty, pleasure, hope; and she was buried in as complete a solitude as any spell-bound maiden of fairy-lore.

These four years had brought many changes, but had only bound her to greater loneliness.

In the first place had come the mysterious disappearance of Ruiz. From that fatal night, four years since, no one had seen or heard ought of the young Spaniard. He had not been missed in the excitement and confusion till the next day. By that time Bert's broken leg had been set, and the household had recovered its usual composure, and then came the question:

"Where is Ruiz?"

For four years that question had remained unanswered.

The Rev. Amos had been well-nigh distracted. He had written to his brother's lawyers, and they had advertised and sent detectives and offered rewards, and put all the usual machinery of the police in motion, and yet no clue,

no faintest sign had been detected of the boy's whereabouts.

From the hour when Opal's words had proclaimed him a murderer, he had disappeared as entirely as if the earth had opened and swallowed him.

Of course the prevailing idea in the minds of the rectory folk was that he had gone back to Spain; but how he got there untraced and almost penniless, no one could guess. He gave no sign of his existence, his money lay unclaimed, but the lawyers still paid the hundred a year to the Rev. Amos Milroy, since his brother's will had made no provision for so extraordinary a contingency as this, and had ordered that sum to be continued until Ruiz had reached the age of twenty-one.

The money had been a great help. Tom had gone to college, and worked hard, and, thanks to his father's splendid grounding, had gained scholarships enough to keep him in funds and help him along the road to that ambition which had once looked so hopeless a thing. The two next boys had been taken, Edgar into a lawyer's office, and Amos into a bank, in Lincoln. Harold, Opal, and Bertie were at home. The latter still suffered from a slight lameness, and had only been very recently allowed to go without crutches. It had been a sad trial to Opal to see her merry, active little brother so helpless, but his time of suffering had not been without its benefits, for it had brought brother and sister into yet closer companionship, and tamed the boy's wild nature and hot temper into a patience and gratitude wonderful and beautiful to see.

Of all these things Opal thought now, as she stood by the drooping willow-trees, and watched the sunset die in slanting lines of gold and red across the low, wet meadows. Her heart felt strangely heavy; her face looked pale and mournful, despite its youth and beauty. With a sigh she turned away at last, and wandered listlessly along, taking very little heed of where she went, so absorbed was she in speculations as to Ruiz Milroy's fate, and the memory of his short, ill-starred sojourn in their midst.

When she found herself close to the old Hall she gave a start of surprise. She had not thought she was anywhere near it, and for long—for years, in fact—she had not pursued her old fancy for trespassing in its dreary precincts.

She reached the old gate, and found it closed and barred

and rudely secured with rusty iron chains, which held it in its place. Entrance was not possible now, unless she scaled the walls, and Opal half smiled, remembering her old tomboy escapades, and how daringly she would once have done even that. Now she contented herself with folding her arms upon the low and crumbling boundary; and, leaning there, surveyed the desolate old place with the pity and wonder that it always inspired in her mind. Even more desolate than of yore did it look, and the slight, graceful figure leaning against the ivy hedge looked strangely out of place in that drear and melancholy spot.

Opal's eyes wandered from arch to window, from wing to wing, and then again dropped to the weed-grown terrace, where broken vases and maimed statues stood in mouldy resignation, and solitude with dusky wings sat brooding over the ravages of time.

Mystery, ghosts, crime, any or all of these might haunt that gloomy pile; it looked a fitting abode for anything except human life. Yet as the girl's eyes lingered in fascinated wonder she fancied she saw something move along the terrace walk—a human figure, if the dusky light could be trusted, and the swaying shadows were not playing tricks with her clear young sight. She looked steadily, wonderingly at the moving object. Yes, it certainly was a figure, the figure of an old man; and as she stood there motionless as the wall she touched, it came slowly along in her direction with the feeble uncertainty of age, a spectacle as pitiful and cheerless as the old Hall itself. He came up to the gate, and examined the bolts, and shook it as if to try its strength; satisfied apparently with its capabilities for resistance, he moved on. At that moment some start or action of Opal's stirred the ivy, and he looked up. Their eyes met. Opal felt almost frightened as she saw that strange face with the shaggy white beard, the thin straggling locks of hair framing in its withered features. Yet of the two faces his expressed more fear than hers, though the fact only recurred to her long afterwards.

There was a moment's silence. Then he said in a low, fierce voice:

"What are you doing here?"

The girl felt too bewildered to answer. She could only stare at those wild, gleaming eyes, and a sense of terror held her speechless.

"Are you dumb?" he asked, shaking his stick impatiently, and looking at her again, with the look, she thought, of some lost soul in torment.

She tried to speak, but that gaze held her spell-bound; no words would come.

"Who are you?" he said again.

"I am Opal Milroy," she faltered, finding power at last to open those frozen portals of speech.

There could be no mistake this time. It was fear that those wild eyes held—fierce, overmastering dread, that paled his face to ghastliness, and made his frail hands tremble as they rested on his staff. He glanced round in terror. His voice, for all his effort at self-control, had in it something of appeal—of entreaty—as if he asked a favour, not enforced a command.

"Go! go!" he cried, waving his hand. "How dare you come here! You have no right. You are a spy, an intruder. Go, I tell you, or——"

He had no need to utter the threat, Opal was too terrified to wait for further words. She turned and flew across the leaf-strewn path and over the marshy meadows like a lapwing. Fear lent wings to her feet, and, though panting and breathless, she never rested until a good mile lay between her and the old Hall of Chalford.

The stars were glittering clear and large in the brilliant wintry sky.

In one of the topmost towers of the old Hall, in a small and curiously fitted chamber, sat a young man busily writing. The chamber would have puzzled and surprised any ordinary visitor. It was nothing but a species of observatory, rudely and scantily appointed; but it held within its four walls an ambition as lofty as those miles of space into which science and patience had given it insight.

The turret contained three windows and had a glass skylight. In the centre, mounted on a moveable axis, was a large telescope. In one corner stood an astronomical clock, regulated to sidereal time. A table near one window was covered with books and papers; a small stove of charcoal gave warmth to the bare, chill place, and crouched beside it was the old man who had so terrified Opal Milroy.

It was verging towards midnight, and for an hour or more no sound had broken the stillness of that strange

chamber save the noise of the pen on the paper, or the beat of the strange clock which marked the star time.

The old man roused himself at last and looked at the writer.

"Do you watch again to night?" he said.

The young man raised his head—a dark Murillo-like head, with great sad eyes that seemed haunted by some mournful memory.

"Yes," he said simply.

"But it is Christmas Eve. You might give yourself a holiday for once. You have satisfied yourself as to the transit of the first point of Aries. You give yourself no rest. You will be ill."

"I have never been ill in my life," answered the young man calmly; "and now that life is only of value so long as I can pursue these studies. Weeks, months, years, how paltry they look beside the eternal wonders of the heavens! I feel like one on a journey, going on from stage to stage, approaching by gradual degrees the confines of the visible universe. A life—a short human life—all devoted to that one pursuit, seems far too brief!"

"I have found it so," answered the old man dreamily. "And yet success was once so nearly mine. I should have made my name as famous as that of Schröter, Mädler, Struve, Herschel, only——"

He paused abruptly. He looked with a strange yearning at the beautiful boyish face—graver, sadder than twice its years could have warranted.

"Only—a woman came between me and my life's ambition," he went on dreamily. "It is always so. We work, they destroy. That is life, or—fate."

His companion made no answer. He was not given to much speech. His thoughts were tuned to graver, higher things than mere material cares. He was unwise with that unwisdom of early youth that sees in its own dreams a heaven, and in its own ambitions success.

"Put away your work; you have done enough," continued the old man presently. "For nights you have had no sleep; for days no exercise, or rest. When I promised to teach you all I knew, I exacted no guerdon but obedience. Give me that to-night. There are things I would speak of. My mind is uneasy and full of care. Come and sit by the stove and talk, or let me talk."

The youth pushed aside his papers, and rose with a somewhat proud and graceful reluctance.

Beside the stove was an old stool. He took it and drew near the feeble warmth of the fire. He was very pale, and his frame was far too slender and fragile to bespeak robust health.

His companion's eyes rested somewhat anxiously and regretfully upon him.

"Ruiz," he said, "what will you do when I am dead?"

The dark eyes looked vaguely at the withered face.

"I don't know," he said simply. "Live on here, I suppose. You have taught me how little is necessary for actual existence. The woods supply us with food, the river with drink; and then there is always the great work."

"The great work!" echoed the old man regretfully. "Ah me, what dreams I had of it, what hopes, what ambitions! Dead, dead—all dead!"

"Your book will live," said Ruiz simply, "and it is so nearly done now."

"And the sands of life are so nearly run out," answered his companion. "And what a life! Dreary, unloved, desolate as any hermit's. Even fame could not quicken these old pulses by a single beat, or give my heart one throb of gladness. Ah boy, there is no sadder thing in life than a lonely old age."

Ruiz was silent. He was thinking of how and where he had first met his strange companion; of how that promise to revisit him had been kept again and again, until, in the sudden shock and terror of finding himself a criminal, he had fled to the old recluse as to a refuge, and begged him for shelter for a brief space.

The old man had taken him into the Hall, and exacted a solemn promise of secrecy, and an assurance that the boy would never venture without the walls of Chalford, night or day, without his permission.

"I am old," he said, "but I like you, and feel I can trust you. I did so from the first hour I saw your face. You are as safe here as if the ocean rolled between you and those from whom you flee. I will bring you news of their welfare from time to time, but your existence will be shrouded in impenetrable mystery."

And so it had been.

No one at the rectory dreamt that the lost and long-

sought-for cousin was living close within their reach, and all the remorse and longing of Opal's heart were unrelieved by any suspicion of his safety or well-doing.

The boy had a wild, romantic feeling that he had sacrificed his wealth in their favour. He never dreamt that law is a stubborn guardian, and demands strong proofs before relinquishing its rights. He had a strange desire, too, to be near Opal, to be within call, to hear of her welfare, to offer up his life, as it were, in a species of martyrdom that some day would win forgiveness for the errors of his passionate youth.

For four years he had lived with the old recluse, and for four years the old man had consciously deceived him. He still deemed himself Bertie's murderer; he still had fits of agony and remorse, as he thought of the bright boyish face lying cold and white in the winter sunset, with closed eyes, whose mute reproach was a knife-thrust in the heart of his slayer; and the old man knew it, and let him suffer.

He deemed it best to keep the boy in his power by this means, to use his strength and skill, his brains and hands, in mental and physical servitude; and time had drifted on, and Ruiz never complained, and how could the dim eyes of age read in that proud young face the dread dreariness of heartbreak, the haunting memories of despair?

Quiet, pale, studious, the boy had passed through four years of utter loneliness and privation, finding solace only in the wonders of that glorious study to which his promise bound him, absorbing himself gradually in its mysteries and discoveries, until he bid fair to rival his master.

And now it was Christmas Eve once more—the fourth anniversary of that night when he had fled hopeless and terror-stricken to this dreary refuge—and he sat there and listened to the old man babbling of his broken hopes and wasted youth, and thought to himself in proud resignation, “My life, too, is over.”

He had never uttered a complaint. He had served the old man like a servant, and performed all the needful offices of their simple life, taking as his reward those hours of study and instruction which to many of his age would have been only penance. He was very weary often, but the young live on even against their will, and now he had become almost reconciled to his sombre and solitary existence.

It was only when sleep brought him some vision of his past life that he felt his spirit rebel against this dull monotony. At other times he did his best to forget that the sun of the south had warmed his veins, and given him those dreams of orange-groves, and blue bright skies, and music, and colour, and beautiful women, and bold men, that made all his memories of his own beloved land.

"Four years—it seems a lifetime," he muttered now as he crouched closer to the stove, and the stars shone out unheeded, forgotten alike by youth and age, while the bells chimed out on the midnight air the old, old message, "Peace and goodwill to all mankind."

CHAPTER VI.

AWAKING.

THE bells had ceased to chime, but the two inmates of the turret-chamber still sat in immovable stillness. The old man had sunk into deep slumber, the younger was lost in thought.

The loneliness of the night, and the greater loneliness of his surroundings, did not trouble him. The sky shone crystal clear above his head, and the windows of the turret showed the starry galaxy sprinkled over that azure field, and tempting him to follow out their mystic rotation with the ardour such a pursuit inspired.

He had written much and studied much in those four years. He was at present engaged on an essay on variable stars, and spent every night that was clear and fine in observing.

The situation of the old Hall and the elevation of this special chamber made such observations very practicable, especially as the strange inhabitant of Chalford had accumulated many valuable scientific instruments for that purpose.

Who or what the old man was, Ruiz did not know. He had received no confidence on that point, and was too proud to ask for it. Sometimes for days together they hardly spoke to each other, and, though the boy had often wondered what secret weighed upon his strange companion's mind and bound him to such complete isolation, he manifested no curiosity on the subject.

At twenty years of age, Ruiz Milroy felt like an old man, and all the passionate emotions and yearnings and excitements of youth were as a dead letter to him. He lifted his head now, and looked at the sleeper with strange compassion. Would such a fate be his? Was his life also to be a haunted one—haunted by the shadow of a crime, the ghosts of dead passions, the memories of a brief dream of gladness?

The thought stung him to a sudden desperation, unlike the usual calm patience that characterised him. He rose and went to the east window, and looked out. The blue sky looked like a shield of polished steel; the stars seemed to say, "Study us, and we will repay you." The great telescope pointed invitingly to glittering Jupiter: but his mind was dwelling on things terrestrial to-night, and the solar system had lost something of its attraction.

His eyes—at first dreary and absorbed—grew restless and almost fierce. He felt as some wild jungle king might feel, caged and isolated from its species. Nature for once cried out against its enforced inaction, and pictured to him hopes, dreams, ambitions, glories far different to that philosophical abstraction in which he had tried to steep his soul.

His pulses leaped, the blood raced wildly through his veins. He flung open the window, and leaned out into the cool and frosty beauty of the night.

From the sky his eyes turned to the great park, and the weed-grown terraces, and the shining line of water that marked the boundaries of Chalford. To rove from them to the low broken wall, and rusty iron gate, and stagnant waters of the heron pool, was a natural consequence.

There his glance paused, arrested by a vision so strange and unexpected, that for a moment his heart ceased to beat, and a pang of fear shot through it. What he saw was a white figure flitting through the woods, and gliding towards the old gate. Reaching it, it stopped and looked over the broken wall towards the grim old building. The turret was so high and far off, that Ruiz could not possibly distinguish the features of this strange apparition, but the pang of fear died out as quickly as it had come, and he quitted the chamber, leaving the old man there asleep, and rushed down the staircase, through the corridor, and out at the side-door, which was his usual mode of egress.

Once on the terrace he skirted the wall, and keeping in the shadow, he made his way towards the gate.

When he reached it, the figure had gone. He seized the trailing branches of ivy, and swung himself up to the top of the old wall.

From that vantage-point he could see a long distance, and he caught sight of the white floating garments a short distance off, as if the owner were skirting the boundary of the park. He sprang down as noiselessly and lightly as a cat, and hurried off in pursuit.

What strange curiosity prompted his actions he could not tell. He never thought of asking himself. An impulse stronger than reason guided him, and he obeyed that only.

A very few moments and he was near enough to touch the figure; another—and he was beside it.

To his amazement it suddenly turned, and, passing him so closely that the floating drapery brushed his feet, went back along the same way as he had pursued it. But one strange thing he noted, and that was the look in the wide-open eyes—a look strange, weird, and wholly unlike to any human expression.

A sudden thought flashed across his mind.

Was she a sleep-walker, this girl, whose face in the weird moonlight had looked without recognition at his, whose sunny hair hung round her like a cloud, whose eyes were like, yet unlike, those haunting violet eyes of his cousin Opal's?

Opal's! the word crossed his brain like a lightning flash. Was it—could it be?

He started off in fresh pursuit, it brought him to the gate, and there again the slender white-clad figure stood gazing over the ivied wall with those fixed, sightless eyes.

Impulsively, unwitting of harm or hurt, he grasped her arm.

"Opal!" he cried hoarsely.

He felt a shudder run through the slight young frame. Her whole body quivered and shook as if under the pressure of some intense physical suffering.

The eyes gleamed back with an awful look of horror and incomprehension—a cry left her lips, so wild and awful that it curdled the very blood in his veins. Then she fell down at his feet and lay there like one dead.

In an instant he flew to the gate, and tore at it, and shook it with the frenzy of almost superhuman strength. It gave way, and he seized the girl in his arms, and bore her into the old Hall. She lay in his arms like a log—stiff, cold, to all appearance lifeless; and terrified beyond all power of speech, he rushed up the broken stairway, and through the dusty dreary corridors, nor ever stopped till he came to the turret chamber.

The old man was still asleep, but that sudden entrance startled him. He opened his dazed eyes and stared at Ruiz in bewilderment.

The boy troubled him with no explanations. He laid his senseless burden close to the stove; he rushed to an inner room and brought out rugs and pillows, and piled them on the bare floor, and lifted her on to them, and chafed her cold and frozen limbs in an agony of dread.

"Who is she? Why do you bring her here?" asked the old man at last, as he tottered feebly over to the senseless figure and stood leaning above it.

"It is Opal—it is my cousin!" cried Ruiz wildly. "Oh, is she dead? Will she never look at me?"

"Opal Milroy! Here at this time. What brought her?"

"Sleep, I should say," answered Ruiz despairingly. "I remember the boys telling me of her strange habit once. I found her walking to and fro beside the old east gate, and when I spoke and woke her she screamed and fell down like this. Oh, she moves, does she not? Oh, say she won't die also."

"If it is as you say, it is a dangerous thing," said the old man. "But what matter if she dies? Your secret will be safe then."

"My secret!" he cried bitterly. "Do you think I place that in the balance with her life? Better suffering—prison—death, than that she should perish thus."

The old man looked at him grimly.

"And this is my reward," he said. "You would sacrifice all the labour of years for the sake of a foolish girl. What is she, or her life to you?"

"My life also, I think," he answered softly, and a dusky flush crept over his face as in sudden, tender shame he bent it over the motionless form.

He had not known how that face and memory had

haunted him till now ; he had not dreamt what possibilities life held, or what he had denied himself in the future.

She stirred and moved, a deep sigh parted her lips, and that warm, sweet breath seemed to him as the scents of Paradise. His arm was still round her, her hand still lay in his. Suddenly he felt the slight figure thrill and tremble in his clasp. Her eyes opened on his face, not startled or surprised now, but only glad with the gladness of a happy dream. An instant, and as her head drooped on his breast he bent and touched her lips with the passion of youth and the reverence of joy.

"Opal," he murmured dreamily, "oh, how happy I am to see you again !"

The girl's languid eyes unclosed.

"This is like death—or heaven," she said faintly. "Is it you, Ruiz, or do I only dream ?"

"Ah no, it is no dream," he whispered passionately, almost wondering that the eloquence and gladness of his heart could find no better utterance than these commonplace words. "I am here beside you."

She struggled into a sitting position, and looked wildly and affrightedly round the strange room.

"How did I come here ?" she cried in terror, as her scared eyes caught sight of the old man standing by the axis of the telescope, and watching her furtively.

Ruiz rose to his feet looking rather embarrassed.

"I—I brought you," he said timidly, and his face flushed like a girl's.

"You !" Her dazed senses, arrested by strong effort, went back on lines of memory to seek for solution of this mystery. But they could find none. Then her eyes travelled slowly downwards and saw her strange attire—her bare feet that had been thrust into slippers, her long flowing hair, and white loose garments, and the blood flew in a crimson torrent to her face and neck.

She could not speak for shame, and wonder, and agony of mind. She covered her face with her hands and trembled in every limb. Ruiz pitied her, but he was equally abashed and bewildered, and he knew there was something about her appearance that was unusual and unlike what he remembered in the days of old.

"You—I think you were walking in your sleep," he faltered at last. "I did not know. You looked so

strange, and I spoke, and then you screamed and fainted, and so I brought you here. At least it is warm and sheltered, and we can send word to your home if you wish."

"It seems all so strange," murmured the girl faintly. "And you, Ruiz, how is it you are here? For four years we have been searching for you high and low, and yet——"

"And yet he was at your very gates," said the old man grimly.

"Why did you leave us?" asked Opal, forgetting even her strange adventure in this new interest, and gazing with rapt and wondering eyes at the beautiful, dark face, above her. "Did you never think how we grieved, wondered, sought you?"

"No," he said simply. "I knew you all hated me, and I had taken your brother's life—or so you thought—though my hand never dealt that blow, I can swear to that."

"His life!" cried Opal wonderingly, and turning her bright eyes from one face to the other; "what do you mean? Bertie is alive and well. He was lame for some time after that fall, but he always told me it was his own fault—his own temper occasioned it."

"Alive!" Ruiz turned and faced the old man with eyes aflame and indignant. "Did you not know this?" he said slowly.

The old man was silent.

Ruiz drew himself up to his full height. Light, hope, joy, the gladness of a new and wonderful relief, flooded his heart, and gave to his face an almost unearthly ecstasy. With a sort of sob he caught his breath, and threw himself beside Opal.

"Oh, to think of it—to think of it!" he cried wildly. "After four years! I have lived here believing myself a murderer, picturing you as hating my very name——"

"I never did that," said Opal with a beautiful blush. "I know we were all very unkind to you. We did not mean it. We were young and spoilt, and did not understand or even try to understand you. I think, when you left us, we felt that every day, and would have given anything to undo the past. But it was too late."

She had forgotten everything, her appearance, her strange

visit here, the old man's presence. A sudden sense of what those four years had meant to the lonely suffering boy came home to her, and her heart grew hot with passionate pity, and her eyes spoke back to his in sweet compassion.

That long, bashful, eloquent look told more than any words, and stirred to life such feelings as neither had dreamt of before.

To Ruiz it seemed as if heaven had opened to his gaze. Never could any moments in after-life be like this strange time that was all joy, and rapture, and wonder fused into the strong fire of his ardent nature, glad with such gladness as never comes twice in a lifetime.

"Let us go home," he said at last, rising and looking round the cheerless room, forgetful now of all charms of science and ambition.

Opal rose too, and the white garments and fleecy woollen shawl fell round her graceful figure like the draperies of a Greek statue.

"Yes, we will go," she said with a shudder. "Some instinct drew me here to-night. I cannot tell what. I know I was dreaming of the old Hall, and striving to reach it, and the gate was barred, and I only saw that stern, forbidding face warning me back; and then I seemed to look and saw—you."

He looked at her with eyes so eloquent that words were scarcely needed. Then he drew her arm in his, and turned to the old and shrinking figure of the old man still leaning there in the dusk of the cheerless room.

"For four years you have deceived me," he said curtly. "I did your work. I kept my promise. I do not reproach you, for you are old and unhappy, I know. Perhaps you did not think of how I suffered. If you had been honest with me I would not have left you as I do. Your secret is your own still, and I will breathe no word of my stay here if you forbid me. And now farewell."

The old man raised his head and looked sadly at the two beautiful young figures.

"Fate is against me still," he said mournfully. "I warned you how it would be. Fate is always a woman. Well, go your way, leaving me in peace. I deceived you—true, but it was for your good. You might have been a

great man. I suppose you prefer to be a woman's slave. Get you gone, and say of me what you please!"

Ruiz took Opal's hand, and led her away. He could not trust himself to speak.

CHAPTER VII.

REQUIESCAT IN PACE.

If Ruiz had once deemed himself an unwelcome intruder at the rectory, he could do so no longer.

The family were roused by Opal's return, and flocked down, startled and alarmed at her summons; but when they saw her companion and heard his strange story, they seemed to find no words or means enough to show their gratitude and delight.

There was no thought of going to bed again. The boys lit the fire in the shabby old parlour, and ravaged the larder for stores; and they all sat round the fire and feasted right merrily; and what with hand-shakings, and embraces, and kisses, poor Ruiz felt absolutely bewildered.

But how happy he was, and how merry they all were, and how radiant and sweet Opal looked, coming down to them after a quarter of an hour spent in donning some wonderful garment with cunning little knots of scarlet here and there, that made her look lovelier than ever in Ruiz Milroy's eyes. And the Rev. Amos sat and beamed on them all with his grey hair still rubbed persistently up the wrong way. And Mrs. Milroy, with her cap awry and her sweet, anxious face quite placid and joyful, could not make fuss enough of the "young savage," and between her embraces, sat and looked at him with eyes half glad and half tearful, and wholly loving, just as his own mother might have looked had she been there.

As for Ruiz himself, he could not talk much, or eat much, though he tried his best, for his heart seemed too full, and his eyes had an unaccountable way of getting suddenly dim. It seemed so strange that all this love and gladness had been waiting to warm his starved heart for all these cold and empty years, and he had never known or credited the possibility of such a thing.

And then how the boys tormented Opal and declared their intention of putting outside bolts and padlocks to the doors and windows of her room, and how the jests and

teasing ceased when their father, raising his ruffled grey head, laid his hand on the girl's sunny hair, and said :

"It must have been Providence who guided your steps thither, my child," and what untold eloquence was in Ruiz's eyes as he looked at her, and said softly :

"I think so, too."

Then at last the rector and his wife bade them good-night, though indeed it was quite daybreak, and the young folks drew closer round the fire, and Opal sat shy and silent by the side of the returned prodigal, and when he timidly clasped her hand, let it rest unrebuked in his.

And whether the boys saw or guessed they were not wanted, is hard to say, but certainly one by one they dropped off, and Opal roused herself with a start, saying she too must go, and could he find his way to his own old room ? and he, not answering, looked up, and meeting her eyes, grew faint and trembled like a leaf.

Seeing her so shy and frightened, he put his arm round the beautiful dainty waist, trembling too at his own boldness.

"You are glad—really glad, to have me back again ?" he whispered.

And though she could have thrown herself at his feet and poured out a torrent of words, so full was her heart, and so happy, that she only dropped her head—meekly, coyly, like a flower faint with sunlight, and said quite as softly :

"Yes."

"You have been with me all these years," he continued, growing bolder as he felt his power and saw how fair, and sweet, and yielding she was ; "I have never forgotten you, or your promise."

"What promise ?" she asked, very, very faintly now.

"That you would be my—sister—too."

She was silent, and her heart beat strangely fast, as surely no sister's heart had need to beat for assurance of a brother's love.

"But after all," continued Ruiz, still more boldly, "I am not sure that I wish you to keep that promise. I want something else, Opal."

"What ?" she asked even more faintly.

"I want you to love me, as I love you—as I have loved you since first I came here, a savage, ignorant boy, to whom you were as an angel of goodness."

He could be eloquent enough now ; how could he help it, looking down at those softly crimsoned cheeks, those long bashful fringes—feeling the quick beat of the passionate young heart answering his own, as only youth and love can answer to each other ?

“What do you know of—love ?” she said at last. “You have only studied the stars these four years, so you told me ; and why may I not be your sister still ?”

“Look in my eyes, and answer me.”

But she could not, for she knew—though she had not studied the stars for four years—that it was no sister’s love her heart held ; she had known it from the moment her eyes had met his again in the weird silence of the turret-chamber.

“If you can only be my sister,” said Ruiz presently, “it will be better for me to go back to the old Hall and study the stars again ; shall I, Opal ?”

Her cheeks paled suddenly ; the little hands clasped themselves round his arm. Her eyes looked up to his in sudden terror.

“Oh, no, no !” she cried. “We cannot lose you again. You could not be so cruel, Ruiz.”

“Then say, ‘Stay for my sake’ !”

A lovely smile curved her lips.

“That is like your old masterful self,” she said ; “you should say, ‘if you please.’”

He laughed too, remembering their first battle and her victory.

“If—you please.”

Again her head drooped, but this time it fell coyly, naturally, on his breast.

“Stay for my sake, Ruiz,” she whispered obediently.

His lips answered her.

It was a week later.

Ruiz Milroy had almost forgotten the old tenant of Chalford in the glory and gladness of his young love-dream. Those dreary years, those mystic studies, the ambition that he had told himself would suffice to fill his life, had all faded into the background of some far-off past. Suffering, misery, privation, all these things were as though they had never been. Yet suddenly and sharply they were recalled to him.

He had received a letter on this morning of the closing year, containing only a few words, but though unsigned and undated, he knew who had written them.

"I am dying, and I would fain see you before my life ends. Come to me to-night, in the turret-chamber. Tell no one of this message."

Ruiz felt somewhat perplexed and distressed as he read. But he went, saying nothing to anyone but Opal.

It was about nine o'clock when he left the rectory. A clear, crisp, frosty night; such a night as he would but a brief while before have spent in long study and abstruse calculations. Now it was only filled with dreams and excited hopes, and the rich promise of years to come.

Never had he thought the old Hall looked so gloomy and melancholy as it looked now. It seemed a place utterly beyond the reach of such joy and gladness as filled his own heart and the home he had just left.

It seemed strange to him to tread the old desolate terrace, and make his way along the familiar galleries and corridors, till he reached the door that cut off the winding staircase leading to the turret-chamber. This door had always been kept locked. It was unlocked now, and he turned the handle and speedily found himself in the old room. There was no light in it save the dull glow of the embers, and the starlight from without. For a moment he stood there bewildered. Then, as his eyes grew accustomed to the gloom, he saw a pallet-bed on the floor, and seated by it a woman.

She rose and faced him in the dull light, a tall graceful figure, with a face tired and haggard, but bearing still the marks of great beauty.

"Are you Ruiz Milroy?" she said.

"Yes," answered the astonished youth, marvelling who on earth was addressing him.

"He has been expecting you," she said, and motioned him forward.

Ruiz advanced and saw, stretched on the bed, the familiar figure of the old astronomer.

The woman bent over the stove and lit a small lamp, and placed it on the table. Then she withdrew, and Ruiz, silent and amazed, seated himself beside the motionless form. The old man opened his eyes and looked at him.

"I thought you would come," he muttered feebly.

His fingers plucked at the covelet of the bed, his head moved restlessly from side to side.

"I—I could not die without seeing you," he went on presently. "I want you to say you—forgive. I wronged you, but I wanted to keep you with me. I liked you from the first. I told you that. Sometimes I thought I would tell you the truth—but I had not courage."

"I forgive you freely," said Ruiz gently and compassionately. "Do not distress yourself. After all, these years have not been wasted. I have learnt much. I owe you a large debt of gratitude for all your teaching."

"And you are happy now," muttered the old man, "happy and beloved. I was that once, and I lost all—all—all! I have often wanted to tell you my story. That woman you saw was my wife. My wife, whom I wronged, misjudged, ill-used—ah, Heaven forgive me!—nearly murdered. I thought I had murdered her. That thought has haunted all my life, and embittered every hour of these terrible years. She was young and beautiful, and I was old and jealous, and selfish too, for I thought more of my books and pursuits than of her, and let her fair young life eat itself out in loneliness and grief. We are an unfortunate and an evil race, we Chalfords. I am glad now that with me the race is ended. I often meant to tell you, but I lacked courage. I wanted to make you my heir; a poor enough inheritance the old Hall is, but still it is yours—after her. No other living creature has any claim upon me. I want to think that in years to come a new race will atone for the crimes of the old, and in you I see one worthy—worthy——"

His voice broke. That brief strength seemed deserting him. Ruiz bent over him anxiously.

"Do not speak more," he said; "you are fatigued and weak. Rest now and I will watch you."

The glazed and languid eyes looked gratefully at the young face. Then they closed in very weariness.

Ruiz sat silently there thinking of the strange story he had heard—understanding by it much of the mystery and loneliness of this haunted life.

An hour passed. The old man slept on tranquilly. The same weird stillness as of old reigned in the little chamber and round the deserted building.

Ruiz heard the door of the adjoining room open and

saw that dark, graceful, woman-form glide in and take her seat beside the sleeper, but she spoke no word—nor did he.

Another hour took its flight. The woman sat with bowed head, waiting. The young man watched the silent figures, himself almost as still as they. Suddenly on the midnight air chimed out the sound of bells—bells glad, joyous, turbulent, ringing in new days, new hopes, new joys, and griefs; ringing out, too, the ended sorrows of an ended life; for, as the sounds cease to echo on the midnight air, a sigh broke the silence of the chamber, and the face upon the pillows grew grey and set in the solemn rigidity of death.

The watchers rose. The woman's eyes were full of tears—the pale face looked sadder still in the shadow of a new grief.

"Leave me now," she said, looking up to Ruiz; "you were good to him, and I thank you. But there is no more to do. You have obeyed his last wish. Heaven bless you for that, and give you the happiness he might once have had, and flung away."

She gave him her hand, and he took it, and looked with grave sympathy at her worn, pathetic beauty.

Then he left her standing there, with the solemn starlight falling on the dead face that had once looked love to hers.

The sorrow of these haunted lives touched him with strange sympathy, pointing as they did with the force of an unexpiated sin to the records of the past, the hopelessness of the future.

He looked at the old Hall as the gate fell back on its rusty hinges. There he had learned life's deepest lessons—from thence he had bought the fruits of learning, patience, endurance.

Those four years had not been wasted. He saw that now—now as he turned away from the records of that sad and misspent life, and by the light of its teaching read the way to purify and amend his own.

The Irony of Fate.

A ROMANCE OF ROQUEBRUNE.

CHAPTER I.

"MOTHER, give me the key for the English lady ; she wants to see the ruins."

A dark, stern-faced peasant-woman came to the door of one of the miserable, half-ruined houses that lie piled among the brown rocks, and shut in by the olive and lemon groves, of Roquebrune. The sky was bright with sunshine ; the blue waters of the Mediterranean lay in rippling radiance at the foot of the hill on which the castle once reared its stately height.

The woman stood there in the doorway, the hot sun beating on her grey head, with its gaudy, scarlet kerchief, her brown and withered face, and her dark, piercing eyes. She held a large iron key in her hand.

"Come, *ma mère*," repeated the young voice with some impatience ; "the lady is waiting. Give me the key, or do you go yourself."

For a few seconds the woman hesitated, Her eyes rested on the lovely face looking up to her own—a face sun-kissed to the bloom and softness of a peach, with a tangle of rich, dusky hair escaping over the brow from the loosely-knotted handkerchief.

"I will go myself," said the woman suddenly ; "go you and play with Fanchette."

The girl pouted.

"I would rather talk to the English lady," she said. "She is clever and kind, and she is so beautiful, and has such lovely clothes. Why may I not show her the ruins ? She is going to sketch. I would ask her to put my face in it, like the great Italian painter did last winter. There would be money for it, I am sure, and you know how poor we are."

The stern face grew colder and more hard.

"Go—do as I bid you," the woman answered. "If the lady wishes for your face, I will call you."

The girl's brow grew clouded and sullen.

"It is always so," she muttered. "Whenever an English visitor comes, no one but thou must speak. To anyone else, I can show the ruins as often as I please."

She turned away. The children were tumbling, and fighting, and screaming, in a noisy group in the rough stone street below. From the dark and squalid courts and doorways women leaned and chattered while they worked. Above the rugged pile of rocks, where the houses were perched in picturesque disorder, the old ruin frowned in gloomy isolation. The woman, key in hand, moved out of the dark niche where she had been standing, and climbed the steep and narrow ascent, till she reached a rough plateau bounded on one side by a broken wall and a wooden gate.

Standing there, and with grave, intent eyes sweeping from point to point of the curving bays, was the English lady. A girl stood beside her—a slender, pale-faced child of some thirteen or fourteen years—with a mass of loose fair hair that gleamed like gold in the sunlight, and a sad and thoughtful face, far too serious and intent for her years.

At the sound of footsteps the lady turned. Her eyes fell on the key of the cicerone.

"Oh," she said in French, "I am pleased you can show me the ruins. Your daughter said she would tell you I wished to sketch up there."

"I am at your will, madame," said the woman in very good French, so good, indeed, and with so pure an accent that the lady looked at her in evident surprise.

"You—you are not of this place?" she said, as the wooden gate fell back, and the woman made a sign to her to enter.

"I have lived here for thirty years," was the answer, "but I am from Paris."

"You have shut your little girl out," said the lady eagerly; "pray let her come too; she is such a bright, intelligent child. She has been telling me a great deal about Roquebrune; it is very interesting."

The woman seemed to hesitate a moment. Then she shook her head.

"No," she said; "her sister is looking for her. Go to Lila," she added, turning to the girl, and with evident reluctance the child obeyed.

Silently the English lady climbed the rough and broken

staircase. She paused for a moment to look at the almost defaced mitre and armorial bearings over the eastern tower.

"It is of the Grimaldi," said her guide in the monotonous tone of one used to reiterate the same thing perpetually. "Those are their arms; the sculpture was done for Augustine Grimaldi, who was a Bishop and came to live here, and repaired the castle more than three centuries ago."

"It is always the Grimaldi," said the English lady. Then she stopped suddenly. "What a view!" she cried rapturously, looking over the blue waters to where Monaco occupies its bold and isolated rock, and thence to the glittering spires, and tall palms, and gleaming marbles of Monte Carlo.

The woman made no response. Long years of tourists' raptures had somewhat wearied her, no doubt. She stood quietly there, her eyes fixed on the steep and winding ascent by which the carriages drive from Nice and Monte Carlo to grim, picturesque Roquebrune, where it lies perched like an eagle's eyrie on a narrow and rugged summit of rock, sheltered only by the dreary background of the treeless hills.

The English lady seated herself on a block of stone, and took out her sketch-book. With a few rapid strokes she put down the points that touched her fancy, working with an ardour and vigour far beyond the usual efforts of amateurs.

"And so you have lived here thirty years," she said presently, glancing up from her work to the stern, brown, withered face above hers. "It is a long time, and this seems a dreary spot. How do you manage to live?"

"There are the lemon-groves and the olives," said the woman. "Yes, it is hard to make a living. But I have done well enough. It was hard at first, when I lost my husband. He died thirteen years ago. Fanchette was but a year old. But the *bon Dieu* has not forgotten the widow and the fatherless."

"You have two children, have you not?" questioned the lady.

"I have two children," the woman answered, with a sudden tightening of the lines about her mouth; "but only one of them is my own."

The lady looked up in surprise.

"Only one! How is that?"

The sombre eyes turned once again to the steep ascent.

"Do you see that road?" she asked suddenly.

"Yes," said the lady in surprise.

"Did you come by it?"

"Yes," she answered. "I drove over from Monte Carlo, where I am staying for a couple of days, on my way to San Remo."

"It is a place of horror to me," said the woman. "For thirteen years I have never looked at it without a shudder."

"It is a dangerous road," said the artist, laying aside her sketch, and rising to look down on the sharp, steep curves that wound around and up the hillside. "I thought, when I was driving how dangerous it looked, especially there," pointing to where the road skirted the rugged and precipitous rocks, with no protection in case of accident.

"A fall there would be fatal," said the woman.

The English lady grew very pale.

"There was an accident near there some years ago," she said with a shudder. "I—I heard of it. A gentleman was killed, and his little child. I knew the wife of the gentleman. She was a school-friend of mine. She had remained in Paris while her husband and the child came to the South. For a long time she never knew anything about it. She was very delicate. The shock killed her when she heard at last."

A strange gleam shot from the dark eyes of the guide.

"It was a shock then!" she said eagerly. "She loved him and her child?"

"Of course," said the English lady in surprise. "Do you know anything about it?"

"I saw it," she answered curtly; "I alone. I lived then in a little cabin out there beyond the olive-fields. It was a winter day, but mild and soft, and close on sunset, and I had come out, and was skirting the path at the foot of the cliffs on my way to the sea. Suddenly I heard a noise like thunder. I looked up, and saw a carriage dashing along at full speed. It reached the curve, one of the horses slipped, then fell over, dragging the carriage with him. It crashed and thundered all down that steep incline. It was terrible. The gentleman and the driver were killed on the spot. The child——"

"The child was killed also, so I heard," said the lady eagerly.

The woman shook her head.

"No," she said; "I found her caught in a bush some way down the cliff. She was bruised, and scratched, and half stunned, but she was alive. I took her to my cabin and did what I could for her. Someone gave notice of the accident at Roquebrune. The authorities made a few enquiries. The bodies were removed to Monte Carlo. They said there was no clue to the gentleman's name. No one seemed to know him. I never heard any more."

"But the child?" questioned the English visitor. "Did you not say you had found her?"

The woman shook her head.

"No," she said doggedly. "It would have been of no use."

"No use!" echoed the lady in surprise. "But it was right. The law could punish you. What made you do so strange a thing?"

For a moment the woman was silent.

"If there had been any enquiry—any claimant, I would have given her up," she said at last; "but there was none—there never has been any."

"You must have had some other motive," exclaimed the Englishwoman. "Why should you have burdened yourself with the care of another child—you, who are so poor? Tell me," she went on gently, "why you did this. The poor mother was a friend of mine, as I said before. For her sake I should like to know the history of her child. She has a claim on me by reason of that friendship."

"And are you rich? Would you give her the life you yourself lead?" asked the woman eagerly.

"I am not rich, but she should have comfort, a home, and an education befitting her position if I knew that your story was true."

"It is true enough," answered the woman. "I kept the child out of—revenge."

"Revenge!" echoed her listener in bewilderment. She began to wonder if the woman was quite in her right senses.

"I will tell you the story," went on her guide abruptly. "It should not pass my lips only that my days are numbered. I feel that, and you—if you were her mother's friend, will repair my wrong-doing for her mother's sake. I have told you that I came from Paris. My youth had been spent there. I was poor. But I was honest, and a good worker. I was happy, till one day I met a young Englishman at a *café chantant*, where I had gone with

a friend. He spoke to me, and I answered. We struck up a friendship—the friendship that can alone exist between a girl of the people and a man far above her in rank, wealth, learning—everything that makes the wide difference that no man's love can bridge. I loved Maurice Dormer, and he loved me, or said he did so well that I believed him. There is no need to say more. He behaved as—as men do in that world of theirs, where truth and honour and simple faith are of less account than expedience, and where broken hearts are thrown aside as lightly as a child's forgotten toy. I came here, and, the next time we met, I looked only on the dead face thrown at my feet by the hand of a remorseless fate. I knew the child must be his, and the thought came into my mind to dedicate her to the life he had left me—the cruel, sordid, working life, with its burdened hours of toil and ill-repaid labour; in which his memory had left the bitter sting of shame and sorrow. On that impulse I took her. For the last ten years I have lived there,” pointing to the dreary mass of buildings that looked scarcely fit for habitation. “The children have led the same life, shared the same home. It is not a bad life if you think of it. Dreary, and hard, and toilsome, but safe and simple as the life of the poor in your great cities can never be. Sometimes when visitors of his nation come here to see the place, I have spoken of the accident; but no one ever seemed to know of it, or spoke his name till you came to-day. I have said to myself if anyone ever comes who knows of him, I will send the child back to her own land, or her own friends, but I had given up the idea at last; and now——”

“Now,” said the English lady eagerly, “Heaven has guided my footsteps here, and put it in my power to redress this long injustice to the poor girl. You have done a great wrong,” she added, flashing her beautiful, grave eyes in sudden stormy wrath upon the grim and sullen face of her informant.

“That may be,” was the answer; “but it is too late to mourn it. I suffered more at her father's hands than ever she has suffered at mine; and she is young and will forget and be happy. As for me, there is no rest save in the arms of death.”

There was something so mournful and dreary in the look

and words, that the soft heart and generous nature of Lesley Lyle were moved to pity despite her indignation.

"You have done a great wrong," she repeated, "but I will do my best to set it right. The girl is heiress to her father's wealth. At present it has lapsed into the hands of another relative, but," with a sudden, vivid blush, "he is a noble and generous man. I have known him for many years. As soon as he is satisfied of her claim he will renounce his rights—I am sure of it. You would, of course, swear to the truth of your story in a court of justice?"

For a moment a look of alarm shot across the brown, lined face.

"If it is necessary," she said sullenly. "But I have proofs. Her clothes that I took off that night are marked with her name—Lilas Dormer—and round her neck was a tiny locket with a woman's portrait inside. It may be her mother's face. You would know."

"Yes, I should know," said the Englishwoman eagerly. "Can you show it me?"

"If you will return to my room," said the guide, "you can see it as soon as you please."

"The sooner the better," answered Lesley Lyle, closing her sketch-book abruptly. "Your story has spoilt my picture; I cannot rest till I have seen the child again. By the way," and she turned suddenly and looked into the hard and weather-beaten face, "which of the two girls is your own daughter—they both call you mother?"

"Fanchette is my child," said the woman steadily—"the one with whom you were speaking when I came to show you the ruins."

A little shadow of disappointment crept over the expressive face of the visitor.

"And Lilas is that beautiful gipsy-looking creature who met me when the carriage stopped, and brought me here?"

"We have always called her 'Lila'," said the woman, who was moving rapidly away in the direction of the broken staircase. "Yes, she is the daughter of your friend."

CHAPTER II.

"AND what do you think of Roquebrune? Did the nearer inspection disenchant you?"

A group of persons were standing on the terrace above

the pigeon-shooting gallery at Monte Carlo. A great golden moon shed its mellow radiance over the sea, and illumined the white marble, the broad spears of the aloes and cacti, and the stately palms in the beautiful gardens beyond. The sea looked smooth as a lake where it rippled round the bay; the lights of Monaco and Villefranche glittered in the distance of the curving shore. A woman who had been silently gazing at the lovely scene, turned abruptly to her questioner.

"I have had an adventure," she said. "It is like a chapter out of a book. Do you care to hear it?"

"An adventure, madame?" said a Frenchman—the Comte de Bris—turning hastily round, and looking with surprise and amusement at the beautiful, calm face of the Englishwoman. "What, at Roquebrune? The dreariest, dirtiest spot on the Riviera. How is it possible?"

The other members of the group turned also with looks of enquiry to the speaker. They were people met by chance, and of more or less importance, who were wintering on this coast of southern France.

Mrs. Lyle was an artist and a widow. A clever woman—some said a beautiful woman also. She was a general favourite with her own as well as the opposite sex, and she never went anywhere without arousing interest, or securing friendship. People said it was because her manners were so charming. She was so thoroughly sympathetic.

"Let us hear the adventure," said a beautiful blonde. "We have twenty minutes before the train starts. It will do instead of a last saunter through the rooms. Can you finish the recital in that time?"

"Oh, in less," said Mrs. Lyle gravely. "It is simply that the woman who showed me the ruins appeared to have two daughters, one lovely and brilliant as a tropical flower, the other paler, softer, gentler, a different type, with a face more appealing than dazzling. I had a long conversation with this child. She interested me greatly. When the mother appeared on the scene the girl was dismissed. After I had been duly conducted to the summit of the ruins I began to sketch. Of course I entered into conversation with my guide. She was a strange creature, and she interested me."

"Then she was to be envied, madame," murmured the French count.

"After a time," went on the narrator, ignoring the interruption, "she began to tell me about an accident that had happened on the carriage-road to Roquebrune some twelve years ago. It is bad enough now, but I suppose it was still more dangerous then. An Englishman and his child were thrown out. He was killed on the spot; so was the driver. It has always been supposed that the child had been thrown into the sea, for her hat was found floating there; but, strange to say, she escaped. This woman rescued her, and took her home to her wretched cabin, and she has lived with her ever since."

"But do tell!" said the pretty blonde, who was an American of a refined type. "Where is the adventure?"

"Perhaps I have used the wrong expression," said the Englishwoman gravely. "It is scarcely that. It is almost a tragedy. The unfortunate man who was killed was the husband of a school-friend of mine. She wrote and told me of the accident, besides sending me a newspaper with the account of it. With the usual accuracy of newspapers, it stated that both the husband and child had been killed on the spot. The shock threw her into a state of semi-paralysis, and a month afterwarde she died."

"Good Heavens!" cried another voice, the voice of the first-speaker, who had asked Lesley Lyle how she liked Roquebrune. "You are telling the story of the Dormers."

"I know," she answered quietly, her eyes travelling from one to another of the expectant faces around her; "and this child who was saved is no other than Lilas Dormer—my dead friend's little girl, and my godchild."

"It is most extraordinary," exclaimed the Englishman. "Are you sure it is true? Why on earth has the woman concealed the fact and burdened herself with the care of a stranger all these years?"

"That was the question I put to her," said Mrs. Lyle. "Her reason is singular. You would scarcely credit a half-educated peasant woman with the strongest of human passions—love, jealousy, revenge. These are the elements of the tragedy. In the dead man's person she discovered one who, years ago, had wronged her. For the sake of vengeance she condemned his child to the hardships of her own life—toil, hunger, labour, poverty."

"Then why has she so suddenly altered her intention?"

"Perhaps from remorse or pity—I cannot tell. The girl

is very lovely. It seems cruel to have condemned her to brutal ignorance and hardships. In any case the woman has changed her intention, and for some time past has made a point of questioning every English visitor to Roquebrune, with a view to discovering whether the story was known, or any clue to the child's friends was procurable. That is why she to-day communicated it to me."

"And is it really true that you knew the people?" cried the pretty American eagerly. "And what will you do with the girl?"

"Educate her, and try to undo the harm of her coarse and hard surroundings," said Mrs. Lyle gravely. Then she turned to the Englishman, who was leaning against the balustrade and looking moodily down at the rippling waters. "What do you say, my friend?" she asked gently.

"Of course," he said, "you are right. If—if there is no doubt."

"There is none," she answered quickly; "none. I have seen the proofs. But you shall come over with me to-morrow and judge for yourself."

"Why should Colonel North go?" asked the Comte de Bris, in surprise.

"He has an interest in the matter," answered Mrs. Lyle. "He stepped into Lilas Dormer's place as next-of-kin. He is, in fact, something like a second or third cousin to the lost child."

"I am afraid, then," chimed in another voice, "that he is not to be congratulated on her discovery."

"Don't make me out a guardian like that of the 'Babes in the Wood'," laughed Colonel North. "I am no worse off than I was before this windfall came—and there is always foreign service."

Mrs. Lyle looked quickly up. Her eyes were troubled and anxious.

"Pooh! there need be no talk of foreign service," interposed the French count. "Colonel North must marry his pretty cousin when she has been civilized. That ends all complications and makes everyone satisfied."

"Mrs. Lyle's story has made you quite suggestive," said Colonel North sarcastically.

"I should like to know its sequel," answered the Count. "I wonder if madame will ever regret the caprice that took her to Roquebrune?"

"Why should I?" asked Lesley Lyle quietly. "I think it was a happy chance. It has given me an object in life, too—something to care for, guide, instruct, and love."

"There have been chances that seemed happy and yet turned out the very reverse," observed the Comte de Bris, as he paused at the flight of marble steps leading down to the little station. "But let us hope nothing so ill-starred will befall your generous impulse. It would be a cruel return."

"There is no generosity in the impulse," said Mrs. Lyle coldly. "I am fulfilling a simple duty. Good-bye, Count, or you will miss your train. It was signalled some minutes ago."

"*Au revoir, madame.* I shall come here to-morrow. Will it be permitted to see the denizen of Arcadia before she is turned into conventional young ladyism?"

"I fear there is not much of Arcadia about Roquebrune," said Mrs. Lyle sadly. "But I shall bring her here to-morrow. You may see her at my rooms in the evening if you like."

"Count, Count!" screamed the little American from the bottom of the flight of steps. "Are you ever coming? The train is in."

"Till to-morrow then," he said hurriedly, and lifted his hat and ran down to the impatient group awaiting him below.

Mrs. Lyle turned away, and she and Colonel North slowly retraced their steps to the gardens, bathed now in silvery light, and full of the music of falling water, and the scents of roses, blossoming there under the shelter of the tall palms, and myrtles, and cactus plants.

The great palace of play was brilliantly illuminated; a crowd of people were listening on the steps and wandering through the paths.

"Are you going in?" asked Mrs. Lyle as they came in sight of the entrance; "there is a concert to-night."

He laughed.

"The music is always good at Monte Carlo," he said, "but do not suggest a temptation. I was there this morning."

"And won?" she asked with assumed carelessness.

"And won, to my surprise. I played in the odour of Royalty if not of sanctity, I assure you."

"That makes very little difference," she said coldly. "I wish you would not play. Why do you?"

"For excitement, I suppose. I really have not analysed the reason yet. You can hardly call my play gambling."

"It is the first step," she said with a sigh. "But to change the subject, tell me frankly what you think of this adventure of mine. It involves a serious interest for you, yet you take it very lightly."

"My dear Mrs. Lyle, the forfeiture of the inheritance won't distress me very much. No one was more surprised than I when I got it; and I always had a feeling that the child's death was never satisfactorily proved. The theory of her falling into the sea was rather improbable, although the accident took place just at that awkward curve."

"I felt," said Mrs. Lyle in a low and troubled voice, "almost afraid to tell you; it seemed such bad news."

"It would not be the first time," he answered coldly, "that I have heard bad news from your lips."

She was silent, but the blood flushed hotly under her pale, clear skin, and her heart throbbed with quick, uncertain beats.

"I thought," she said after a somewhat lengthened pause, "you had forgotten that. It is such an old story now."

"You are right," he answered coldly; "it is an old story, and women have short memories. I suppose I ought to have forgotten long ago. Let us imagine I have done so. It won't do to quarrel now we are co-partners in the guardianship of this long-lost heiress. What a tale for the lawyers it will be!"

"Will she be very rich?" asked Mrs. Lyle, steadying her voice with effort.

"In her own estimation she will seem so, no doubt, after the life she has been accustomed to. But the property is worth only about a thousand a year. It was hampered with debts and mortgages. Dormer was very careless, and certainly very extravagant. I am rather curious to see how she will take the news. Did you tell her of it?"

"No; she had run off somewhere. The woman—Mère Jeanne as they call her—said she would probably not return till nightfall, so I only left word that I would call to-morrow. Of course we ought to remove her at once."

"Of course," he echoed. Then presently he looked down at his companion's face. It was very pale under the clear light of the moon-rays. "I wonder," he said, "how you will civilise her?"

A sort of shadow seemed to darken the firm outlines of the clear cut face.

"Do you think," she asked, "the task will be very hard?"

"I will tell you," he answered, "when I have seen her. After all," he added jestingly, "It would be odd if I followed De Bris's advice. You say she is very beautiful. The post of guardian is somewhat onerous. Do you think I ought to undertake it?"

"I think," she said calmly, "there can be no possible doubt of that."

"Whatever the result?" he asked, still half laughing, half in earnest. "Remember, if I follow your counsel, I shall feel quite entitled to blame you for any disaster that may accrue."

"Do not jest," she said gently. "You know I am somewhat of a fatalist. I cannot believe it was only an idle chance that led me here for the first time in my life."

"And me," he said, very low, and with equal gravity, "for the first time in mine."

She shivered a little as the wind blew up from the sea, stirring the shadowy palms, and rifting the scents of the roses.

"It is growing chill," she said. "I must go back to the hotel. At what hour to-morrow will you be ready to start for Roquebrune?"

"As early as you please. May I order the carriage for ten o'clock? You will excuse the natural anxiety of a—guardian."

"Ten," she said coldly, "will suit me admirably. The child must have some decent clothes before the evening."

"How a woman's ideas always fly to that all-important necessity—clothes!" he said laughing. "At ten to-morrow then?"

"At ten to-morrow," she echoed, giving him her hand. It was cold as ice—yet not so cold, it seemed to her, as the shadow of a fear that had stolen to her heart under the cover of an idle jest, and buried beneath its chilling frost a hope that had only just put forth its tender buds after long, sad years of desolation.

Not so cold, so sad, so pitiless, he would have said, had he seen her sitting there in gloomy misery while the hours of the night chimed on unheeded and unheard.

"I threw happiness away once!" she cried again and again, in despairing reiteration. "And now another will rob me of it just as I have learnt its worth. What fate

brought me to that girl? She has all that I have lost—beauty, youth, passion, possibility. And he will see them and recognise them, while I—I can only stand aside and break my heart in silence. He has not forgiven the error that parted us in those bygone years. He will not forgive it now. I read it in his face to-night.”

CHAPTER III.

A SILENT and almost embarrassed half-hour's drive took Colonel North and Mrs. Lyle to Roquebrune.

The day was lovely. There was something exhilarating in the glad and cloudless morning air, the soft sea wind, the sunlit vapours drifting over the mountain heights, the brilliant sunshine that lit with golden flame the wide blue waters and the far-stretching olive-woods and orange-groves.

The carriage stopped at the *Place*, and Colonel North glanced up with some curiosity at the quaint square, shut in by frowning houses, and with its mediæval gateway and labyrinthian passages and streets, that seemed lost in shadowy darkness.

Mrs. Lyle led the way up the rude rocky steps, and towards the ruined tower which looked down on the quaintly-tiled roofs.

Everything here betokened poverty and discomfort. Colonel North looked at it all with unwonted distaste. He was a man of fastidious tastes and extreme refinement. When he pictured his future ward amongst these surroundings he shuddered. Suddenly a glad, shrill cry startled him. He looked up, and saw standing before him in the sunlight the figure of a young girl—the very incarnation, so it seemed to him, of natural grace and loveliness. Her coarse striped gown was old and patched, so was the apron that partially covered it; but both were spotlessly clean, and seemed to set off the full-rounded lines of the lithe young form to the best possible advantage. Her head was uncovered, and coil upon coil of bright hair caught the warm glow of the sun-rays in their rippling masses, and strayed in little rings and tendrils over the low brow.

Her lips were scarlet as a pomegranate-bud, and were parted now in the eager welcoming smile that greeted the arrival of the English lady.

“Mother has told me,” she said, in her quick, rather

shrill voice, "you are going to take me from here. Is it not so? I am to be a great lady. I could not believe—I have been awake all night thinking of it. Fanchette is so silly; she does nothing but cry. She is at the church now praying for me. I am too happy to pray. Is it really true? Have you come for me?"

A little shadow crept over Colonel North's face. Something in the tone, look, and manner of the girl jarred on him. She had certainly imbibed all the ways and manners of her peasant friends. Beautiful as an angel she certainly was, but there was nothing of innate refinement, no spark of Nature's nobility, apparent in voice or gesture, and the light selfishness of her words seemed totally free from regret or remembrance.

"Yes, my dear," said Mrs. Lyle gravely; "I have come for you as I promised. Your mother, no doubt, has told you your history."

"*Mais oui*," said the girl, nodding her pretty head quickly; "she should have told it me long ago. It was wicked to keep me here. I always hated it; and I hate work. I shall never have to work again, shall I?"

"No," said Mrs. Lyle gravely; "but you must be obedient, and learn all things fitting your new station. This gentleman is going to take care of you, and have you educated. He is, in fact, your guardian, and will stand in your dead father's place. We both wish to make you happy for your parents' sake."

"Oh," said the girl carelessly, "I am sure to be happy. It must be so fine to be rich, and wear beautiful clothes, and never have to work, or wash, or spin from one day to another."

Then she flashed her large, brilliant eyes on the grave, handsome face of her new guardian.

"Am I to live with you?" she asked curiously.

A little flush of embarrassment coloured Colonel North's cheek.

"I—I do not know. I have not thought about it yet," he said. "I think you must go to school first."

"Oh, I have been to school—there," she said petulantly, nodding in the direction of the church. "The sisters teach us. I can read, and write, and sew, and count figures. Need one know more?"

"A great deal more," said Colonel North smiling. "You must make up your mind for three years, at least,

of school-life before you can take your place as your father's daughter among your father's friends."

Her bright face grew clouded ; hot, passionate tears filled her eyes.

"I hate learning !" she said sullenly ; "and if I am rich, and a lady, why can't I do what I like ?"

Mrs. Lyle glanced at her companion.

"Your task will be somewhat onerous, I fear," she said in English. Then she turned to the girl. "We can talk about these matters afterwards," she said. "Where is your mother ? I wish to speak to her."

"She is in there," said the girl, pointing to the interior of the dark, unsavoury-looking domicile ; she is looking over my clothes. Shall I have new ones, like yours, at once ?" she added eagerly.

Mrs. Lyle did not answer. She was conscious of a keen feeling of disappointment, and yet a thrill of relief mingled with it. Colonel North moved away.

"I will take a stroll into the church," he said, "and then come back for you. You will have a good many things to arrange with the woman, I suppose."

He walked away. The street was long and narrow ; the sunlight could not warm or light it ; it was dark with the overhanging roofs of the old, high, discoloured houses. He pushed open the church-door and entered. The interior was brightly and lavishly coloured. The little side chapels were profusely decorated, and the altar was gay with gilding, and flowers, and tall candlesticks, above which towered a large gilt cross. Colonel North sauntered slowly through the little building. It seemed quite deserted ; but, at last, in one of the small chapels, in the darkest corner of the whole church, he saw a figure kneeling. It was a slender, childish figure, and the attitude was one of intense and absorbed devotion. Fearful of disturbing her, he seated himself on one of the rush-bottomed chairs, and from there took a leisurely survey of the place.

Presently the young suppliant raised her head. Then she crossed herself and rose to her feet. By her so doing he caught sight of her face ; suddenly he remembered the words of his new ward. This, then, must be Fanchette, the other girl. The thought gave him an interest, and he rose and approached the little chapel where she stood. She looked at him with natural curiosity, but she did not

speaking. He saw that she had a very fair and uncommon face—tanned and browned with exposure to the sun and air, but full of light, and youth, and health, and with soft, dark eyes that wore a grave and questioning look as they met his own.

"Is your name Fanchette?" he asked abruptly.

The girl looked amazed.

"*Mais oui, monsieur*," she said.

Her voice was sweet and low—the one thing in woman-kind about which Colonel North was critical.

"You look surprised," he said. "The fact is, I have come here to-day to take away your sister—your supposed sister, I should say. She told me you were here. Would you not like to say good-bye to her? She leaves very soon."

The flush faded from the girl's face. She drooped her head.

"Yes, please," she said timidly; "I was only saying a prayer for—for her happiness in the new life. I did not think she would so soon leave us."

"Will you come back with me?" asked the Englishman. "I fancy she must be ready now. She seemed very eager to get away from this place."

"She does not like it—she never has liked it," answered the girl, moving away as she spoke down the shadowy aisle. "Of course now I can see she was never meant for it. She is so gay and beautiful, and she hates work, and poverty, and everything that is common and ugly. She has said to me so often, 'Oh, if I were only a lady—if I were only rich!' And she is a lady, monsieur, is she not? So mother told us last night, and she will go away to be rich, and great, and happy, and—and forget us, I suppose."

"Are you very fond of her?" asked Colonel North with some curiosity.

"Oh yes—very. I have always loved her as a sister, and I can't change now. I hope she will not change either—not very much, at least. I should grieve so if she forgot us, and so would mother."

"Your mother," he said gently, "will have you. Do you know Lilas's story? Do you know that your mother has been guilty of a great wrong in hiding her existence and defrauding her of her rights all these years?"

"Mother has always been very good to her," said the girl sadly. "Often I used to think she loved her better than

she loved me. But no one can help it. She is so bright and so gay. She is just like sunshine, and everyone talks of her beautiful face."

"She is very beautiful, certainly," said Colonel North. "But she is wilful too, and rather fond of her own way, I imagine."

"Oh," said the girl quickly, "we always gave in to her. I am glad of it now, for of course she had no right to work as I did, or as mother did. I am afraid she feels very angry now she knows."

"Is it a very hard life, yours?" asked Colonel North gently. "It seems as if it must be. How can you all live in this dreadful place?"

"We are all very poor," she said. "We work in the olive-woods, and at the lemon and orange gatherings. But I have always had enough to eat, and so has Lila, and mother has been very good, and we went to school whenever we could. I do not think it has been a very hard life. I have been very happy always. Only I should like to know more, and to read books, and see other countries; but," with a sigh, "perhaps Lila will tell me all about them. There she is, looking out for me! Oh," with a sudden little catch in her breath, "how I shall miss her! How I shall miss her!"

Her lips trembled. All the sunshine grew blurred and indistinct before her. Lila herself was flitting about impatiently, while Mrs. Lyle was talking in grave and absorbed tones to Mère Jeanne.

Colonel North looked curiously at this woman, whose strange caprice had suddenly altered the even tenour of his life. Her face did not please him, and his own took a certain cold and forbidding hardness as he searched it. Their eyes met like a challenge.

"I suppose," he said sternly, "you are aware that, by withholding this child from her natural rights all these years, you have brought yourself under the penalty of the law?"

"You can do what you please," she answered defiantly, "The law did not trouble itself much to seek for the child neither did any relatives or friends, so far as I could ever learn. I have written out my statement here at madame's request, and signed it in her presence. If you want any more from me you know where to find me."

She went within, and closed the door on the astonished group.

Mrs. Lyle turned appealingly to Colonel North.

"Do not trouble her further," she said. "She feels the parting terribly. If we are satisfied nothing else matters. The law can do no more for us than we have done for ourselves."

Meanwhile the two girls had drawn a little aside.

"You will not quite forget me, Lila," pleaded Fanchette. "Promise me that. You seem so glad to go. But we—oh, what shall we do?"

"Glad? Of course I am glad!" cried the girl, tossing her lovely head in triumph. "Did I not always tell you this life would not suit me? I felt I was born for something greater—grander. Now I have got it. Of course I won't forget you, and I will come and see you sometimes."

"But," pleaded Fanchette, "aren't you sorry—a little sorry? Your fine friends can't love you as we do who have known you all your life, and it seems to me as if after all one couldn't be quite happy without love."

"Bah!" said the girl contemptuously. "I shall have jewels and fine dresses, and do just what I please; I shall be happy enough."

"Well, my dear, are you ready?" asked Mrs. Lyle gently. The girl sprang forward.

"Oh, yes, quite," she cried; "pray let us go now."

Fanchette came forward slowly. Her face was very pale, but there were no tears now in her eyes.

"I fear you will miss your companion very much," said Mrs. Lyle; "but I will bring her to see you as often as she cares to come. We shall stay at San Remo till the end of May, and that is not so very far."

"I shall always be glad to see her if she cares to come," said Fanchette slowly, as her eyes rested on the proud and lovely face which already was clouded with impatience.

"Oh, I will come," said Lila; "do not fear. I must show you my dresses, now I am a lady."

She kissed her adopted sister somewhat hurriedly, if effusively. After all she was but a child—a child to whom the world was an unknown and glorious place. She was all eagerness and impatience to see it. In her nature was no space for the tenderness of regret, for the sorrow of parting words. Without a sigh, with scarce a backward

glance, she left her childhood's friends and home. Her whole thoughts were absorbed in imagining a new life; for the old she had no regret, even as she would soon have no memory.

CHAPTER IV.

THAT drive from Roquebrune to Monte Carlo was the first taste of luxury that Lilas had yet experienced.

She had lived under the shadows of the quaint old town for thirteen years, and yet had never gone further than a quarter or half a mile along the Cornice road, in the direction of the wicked little principality whose name is world-famed by reason of that wickedness. To bowl along now behind those fleet horses, past the barren heights of tawny stone, the steep cliffs, the orange-groves, and vineyards, and villas, was to her a delight almost unreal in its intoxication.

When she caught sight of Monte Carlo, with the sunlight shining on its gilded spires, the sea dancing and gleaming far below the marble steps and white terrace, she uttered an exclamation of delight. Often and often she had looked at the dazzling shore, and envied the gay crowds who came to winter there as regularly as the season came round. Those hills of amethyst crowned with ivory snows, and clothed with grey olive woods, and ilex-groves, had had for her a fascination that no words could convey. Now as the carriage swept round the curving road and past the rippling silver of the sea, she clapped her hands and laughed aloud for very triumph.

Colonel North looked at her with amazement. She was wonderfully lovely.

"If only she would not speak," he said to himself critically, thinking of the story of the Princess and the frogs.

"Have you never seen this place before, and you live so near?" he asked in surprise.

"Never, monsieur," she answered. "Oh, how lovely everything is! It is like one's dreams of Paradise!"

"Shall I stay here?" went on the girl eagerly. "You do, do you not?"

"We must leave to-morrow," said Mrs. Lyle gravely. "I am going to San Remo, as I told you. There are some good schools there, and no time must be lost."

The girl pouted.

"I should like to stay here," she said; "I know I shall hate school."

"Very probably," remarked Colonel North; "but, my dear, you will have to put up with present penance for sake of future benefit. Here we are at the hotel. You are going to enter upon the first stage of civilisation, I suppose—dress."

They dismounted, and Mrs. Lyle hurried her new charge past the wondering waiters, and into her own room.

"My maid will soon alter your appearance," she said. "I gave orders for some dresses to be sent here. You will have to spend the day indoors. But there is the view. You must content yourself with that."

She moved over to the window. It looked over the gardens and across to the beautiful sweep of dazzling blue sea. The girl's eyes glanced indifferently at the prospect, but they kindled with eager fire as she saw the pile of garments heaped on the table.

"Are they really for me?" she cried eagerly.

And her hands trembled, as they moved among the soft stuffs and pretty white linen and laces.

The French maid smiled in sympathy. It was quite a task after her own heart to rearrange and organise a toilette that should transform this wild mountain-flower into a conventional garden-blossom, and she was not sorry to see Mrs. Lyle draw her easel up to the window and sit down to work.

Lilas flitted to and fro, restless as a newly-caged bird. She asked innumerable questions. She was full of audacity, alert and inquisitive, and quite unabashed by her own ignorance and rudeness.

Everything around her was beautiful and artistic. The thick carpets, the draperies of the windows, the big bowls of flowers, the palms that stood in great china jars—all were things novel to her sight and sense. But her attention was roving and unappreciative. She felt far more interest in the French maid's clever fingers, and in the measuring and fitting that from time to time associated her with the work going on. At one o'clock the gong sounded for the *table-d'hôte* luncheon; but Mrs. Lyle ordered hers to be brought to her rooms, though her sensitive nature suffered severely at the rough, rude ways and remarks of her young charge.

In the afternoon she went out, leaving the girl in charge of Célestine. When she came back it was time to dress for dinner. She found the *salon* untenanted, and passed on to the sleeping-chamber beyond.

On the threshold she stopped, amazed at the lovely vision which greeted her sight.

The dress had been finished. It was only of plain, cream serge, made simply, but fitting like a glove the tall, full and graceful figure of the young girl. Her hair, with its beautiful lights and shades, was brushed simply back from her low, broad brow, and fell in a long, loose plait to her waist. A black velvet collar relieved the colourless serge, and cuffs of the same material finished off the sleeves, and toned down the rough, brown hue of her hands.

"What do you think of me, madame?" she asked gleefully. "Am I not fine? Célestine says I look quite a lady, and fit to go among all the great people here. Will you let me?"

Mrs. Lyle shook her head.

"No, my dear; not to-night," she said firmly. "But some of my friends are coming in here after dinner, and you shall see them. You know your manners are too rough and brusque yet, as I told you at luncheon-time. You would not know how to behave yourself among all those people. And it would be no pleasure to you to be laughed at. You must have a little patience before you take your place in society."

"But how do I look?" she persisted. "Am I beautiful? Célestine says I am. What do you think?"

"Yes, you are beautiful," said Mrs. Lyle gravely. "But it is not well to say so yourself, or ask for the opinion of others. Ladies never do so."

A cloud of anger shadowed the childish face. The rebuke stung her new sense of importance, and she felt a sudden dislike to this Englishwoman who had been her mother's friend.

She turned sullenly away, and continued to survey herself in the glass, while the French maid attended to her mistress.

Mrs. Lyle did not speak to Lilas again until she herself was dressed. Then she said:

"I will send your dinner up here, my child, and at nine o'clock your guardian and some of his friends are coming. You must amuse yourself with the books and pictures in the *salon* until I return."

The girl's face brightened. It would be something to see these visitors, she thought. When she found herself alone she drew her chair up to the window. The gardens were lit now, and the Casino was brilliantly illuminated. Far to the south stretched the tideless waters of the Mediterranean, melting into the dim hues of the evening sky. The newly-risen moon showed the sombre background of hills, and glistened on the white villas, and semi-tropical gardens, and stately palms.

The girl's restless eyes swept from point to point, only to come back with ardent longing to the magic domes and spires of the Palace of Play.

She longed to penetrate those stately portals, that the crowds of men and women were leaving or entering. It seemed to her that all imaginable glories and splendours must lurk there, and she resented Mrs. Lyle's decision that she was to remain here in solitude within a stone's-throw of those magic delights.

Presently the door opened, and a servant brought her a repast which seemed to her fit for a queen. The delicate napery, and silver, and glass; the tempting dishes, and fruit, and confectionery; for a time diverted her attention, and occupied her mind. But in a quarter of an hour she had eaten as much as she wanted, and again turned her attention to the Casino. The more she looked the more she longed to enter. When the waiter came in she asked him how long the people would be at dinner, and he told her till eight o'clock or later.

He removed the tray, and again she was left to solitude. Then a thought struck her. She went into the adjoining chamber and looked at herself. The vision was so lovely that she laughed aloud in very triumph.

"Why should I not go?" she said half-aloud; "no one will know. I can come back here before they have done dinner. I shall only just peep in; it can do no harm."

On the bed lay the hat which Mrs. Lyle had worn in the morning—a small, black velvet *toque*. The girl had never worn any head-covering except a handkerchief, but she knew if she went out she would look odd unless she had a hat or bonnet; she put on the *toque*. It suited her admirably. With the delighted laughter of a child, she next seized a pair of gloves that belonged to Célestine, and which the French maid had shown her how to put on that

afternoon. Delighted with her appearance, she next opened the door and slipped out into the corridor.

No one was about. She soon found her way to the grand staircase, and ran swiftly down into the vestibule. Every one was in the *salle à manger*, where *table d'hôte* was in full swing. The porter saw her, and opened the heavy swinging door, and she passed through, and found herself in the grounds.

A sense of freedom and delight thrilled her veins. Her feet seemed to dance along the smoothly gravelled path. The wind stirring the palms seemed to whisper in her ear : "You are young and beautiful ; do as you will." A few moments brought her to the steps of the Casino. She glanced up, half-fearful yet undeterred. The flower-girls, with their baskets piled with fragrant blossoms, tendered her bunches of violets, or roses, or camellia buds. She looked at their coarse clothes, and thought what a change a few hours had made in her own appearance. There were some gaily-dressed women just before her. They swung open the doors and she followed them. She found herself in a large lofty vestibule, lavishly decorated, round which ran a gilded balcony. A crowd of men and women were pacing to and fro, or lounging in the velvet seats. The air was hot and heavy with the odours of cigarette smoke and innumerable scents. The girl stood there for a moment in bewilderment. It was not the paradise she had expected. Facing her she saw some doors through which people were hurrying eagerly and excitedly. She advanced in that direction, and passed in without question or comment. The atmosphere was hot and stifling. The glare of the gas-lights showed the Moorish decorations, the frescoed ceilings, and painted walls, and fell with a lurid glow upon the crowd that stood three and four deep around the tables.

Impelled by curiosity, the girl advanced to one of the two tables in the first room. She was tall enough to look over the heads intervening between her and the mysterious board. She marvelled whatever they were doing. She saw a pile of gold and silver on the green cloth ; she heard the whirling of the cylinder, the rattle of the little ivory ball, a monotonous cry, then a faint murmur, the clink of the coins as the rake swept them to the bank, or the *croupiers* dealt out the winnings, and her amazement increased.

Again and again the same thing was repeated. The calls

of the *croupiers*, the clink of the coin, the whirl of the cylinder, the sudden hush as the first "click" of the little ball stayed all further staking, and kept expectation and suspense on tenter-hooks till the fatal number was announced.

To the girl it seemed intensely stupid. The sight of so much money astonished her, but, as she understood nothing of the game, she could see no reason for the breathless interest it appeared to awaken in the minds of both spectators and players.

Soon she moved away into the second room.

It was much larger and handsomer; there were more tables, and a far greater crowd. Here and there she caught sight of her face and figure reflected in a mirror. One or two men looked curiously and insolently at her as she moved amongst the throng who were promenading the parquet floor. Again she took her stand at one of the tables, this time close to a *croupier*. She had stood there a moment, when a voice said in her ear:

"Mademoiselle, will you have the goodness to stake for me?" She looked round amazed and half-frightened. It was a young man who had spoken. In his hand was a *rouleau* of gold. He extended it to her. "Put it on any number you fancy," he said.

She glanced at the table. She saw the squares and columns, and the gold numbers glittering above the green cloth. Her face flushed scarlet.

The now familiar cry, "*Messieurs, faites votre jeu?*" rang out on the stillness. She saw the coins piled here and there. The number before her was twelve. She leant forward, placed the pile of gold on it. The wheel was turned, she saw the little ball set flying on its fateful errand. Her attention was absorbed. Everything seemed to swim dizzily before her.

"*Rien ne va plus!*" cried the *croupier*.

She drew her breath sharply. She felt suffocated. An instant's breathless silence, then, "*Douze. Rouge. Pair et manque!*" fell on her ears. A hand touched her arm.

"A thousand thanks, mademoiselle," said the voice beside her. "You have saved me!"

She did not speak. She was trembling with excitement. She saw a pile of gold and notes thrown down on the number she had selected. and watched her companion as

with pale face and burning eyes he gathered up his winnings. He turned to her then.

"You know nothing of *roulette*?" he asked.

She shook her head.

"Ah," he said, his eyes kindling, "it is always so. Chance and ignorance are the true inspiration. Will you favour me again? Place between any of those three squares. We cannot risk the single number so soon."

She did as he told her, and staked a pile of louis between nineteen and twenty-one. Again success attended the venture.

Three times she played for him, and each time he won. After the third venture he asked her if she would not tempt fortune on her own account. The idea of possessing a pile of those sparkling coins delighted the girl; but she told him she had no money.

"It is the least I can do to be your banker," he answered. "Take what you like."

She took one louis, and, without a moment's consideration, placed it on *zéro*. Two or three people looked at her in amaze. Then one or two altered stakes. Her new friend remonstrated.

"That is the most unlikely," he said.

She only laughed. Whizz went the ball. Her blood seemed on fire; her eyes were ablaze with excitement.

"*Rien ne va plus.*" The ball spun round and round—slackened—stopped. "*Zéro*," came the monotonous note of the *croupier*.

She clapped her hands with childish delight. A moment or two, and then notes and gold were showered upon her. Her fingers grasped them greedily—almost fiercely.

"Here is your piece," she said, turning to the young man.

Then a low cry of fear escaped her. She found herself face to face with her new guardian, Colonel North!

CHAPTER V.

MEETING those stern eyes, Lilas turned pale with fear. The piles of gold, the brilliant lights, the gaudy colours, the flashing gems, the crowd of faces grew dim and blurred before her.

Colonel North glanced from her frightened face to the

money in her hand. His eyes flashed. He drew her almost fiercely out of the crowd.

"How did you come here?" he asked low and wrathfully. "And what does this mean?" touching the notes and gold that were crushed in her fingers.

Her lips trembled. No one had ever spoken to her like this. She was silent. She could find no words readily, and his look and gesture were so full of scathing rebuke that it seemed to her she must have committed a grave fault.

He hurried her on—past the curious faces, the insolent eyes, the mocking smiles. She was in the vestibule once more. It was almost deserted. He turned to her again.

"Speak!" he said impatiently. "How dared you come here alone?"

She was not devoid of courage, and her temper was quick and passionate.

"I wanted to see it," she said audaciously. "I had been shut up there"—nodding in the direction of the hotel—"all day long. I was alone, and I saw the people coming here, and I followed them."

"And how did you learn to gamble?" he asked. "You have certainly lost no time in acquiring the lessons of the place."

"I was standing there by the tables," she said, colouring shame-facedly beneath his scornful eyes. "I could not understand what they were doing. Someone asked me to put some money down on the cloth, and so I did, and he said I had saved him. I did that three times, and then he told me to play for myself, and they gave me this"—opening her hand and looking with a reassuring sense of triumph at her winnings. "I did not know it was wrong."

Colonel North smiled bitterly.

"You are a true daughter of Eve," he said. "My post of guardian promises to be onerous. Now come back with me to the hotel. I don't know what Mrs. Lyle will say to you."

She followed him silently across the marble floor, and down the steps. The air was fresh and keen. The soft, mysterious dusk was illumined here and there with gleaming lights. There was a sound of falling water and of swaying leaves. After the stifling atmosphere of the *salle de jeu* it was delicious to breathe this coolness, and fragrance, and peace. Scarcely anyone was about, and Colonel North in-

voluntarily slackened his pace. He looked searchingly at the girl's face and figure, transformed into yet greater loveliness by her simple, dainty toilette. The sternness left his face. He gave her all a man's ungrudging admiration, and she was quick enough to detect the change. She touched his arm appealingly.

"Oh, please, say you're not very angry," she implored. "I did not know it was wrong."

"You know disobedience is wrong, do you not?" he said more gently. "And had Mrs. Lyle not told you to stay within while she was at dinner?"

"It was so dull," she said; "and I thought I was to obey you, not madame. She said you were my guardian."

"And will you obey me?" he asked.

"Oh, yes, yes; indeed I will," she cried eagerly. "Only say you are not angry. You frightened me just now."

"Did I? Well, I am not angry now—only you must promise me never again to wander out by yourself. It is not safe or fit for a young girl."

"I promise," she said. Then she added naïvely: "But we leave here to-morrow."

He laughed.

"So we do. But there are other places, so your promise must serve for them. I want you to become good and obedient, and clever and accomplished; you will have to tread a different path now."

"Yes," she said, "I know." Then she hung down her head in momentary shame. "Must you tell madame?" she said timidly. "I am so sorry, and indeed I meant no wrong, and I will never disobey you again, if—if you tell me I must not."

He was touched and flattered. After all she was but a child, and had only a child's ignorance and waywardness. They were close to the hotel. The light fell in a flood upon her upturned face, her lovely, pleading eyes, and quivering mouth.

"Well," he said, "I will not tell of you this time, and I must take the blame of your excursion on my own shoulders. Don't look so frightened. I am coming in also."

They passed up the staircase and entered Mrs. Lyle's *salon*.

She had just come up from the *table-d'hôte*. She looked annoyed as the door opened and Colonel North and the girl entered together.

"Have you missed her?" he said coolly. "I have been giving her some exercise. The gardens were almost deserted, and she has been indoors all day, she tells me."

"She could scarcely go out till she had some decent clothes," said Mrs. Lyle coldly. She saw that her hat had been appropriated, but she saw also that the face beneath it was lovely enough to win any man's fancy, if not his heart.

Lila stood quietly beside her guardian. She had thrust her winnings into her pocket, and was now drawing off her gloves. The contrast between her pretty dress and her coarse, rough hands jarred on Colonel North's fastidious taste. He turned away, and the girl went into the adjoining room to remove her hat, and smooth her ruffled hair.

There were some half-dozen people in the *salon* when the girl re-entered it.

Every eye turned to her. She looked stupidly from one to the other of the strange faces.

Mrs. Richard A. Crane, the pretty American blonde, advanced in her swift, impetuous way, and drew her into the room and the light of the rose-shaded lamp.

"We are all come to see you," she said. "You've dropped on us like a romance out of the clouds—not, by the way, that a romance would drop from there. Why, you're just wonderful! How did you get into a gown like that so soon? It must feel awful strange. Doesn't it?"

The girl looked at her in a sort of blank stupor. She did not understand a word. She only saw an exquisitely-dressed little person, with a tangle of red-gold hair, and a complexion delicate and transparent as wax, and the loveliest hands, that were always fluttering and moving restlessly, and sending sparks of light from diamond-covered fingers.

"She can't understand you," said Mrs. Lyle. "You must talk French." Then, pitying the girl's embarrassment, she went over to her and placed her in a chair.

"My friends are very much interested in your story," she said. "They could scarcely believe it."

The Comte de Bris turned to Colonel North.

"You had better give it the sequel I suggested," he said. "*Ma foi!* I almost envy you the possibility. What a lovely face!"

"Do not flatter her yet," said Colonel North coldly. "She will learn her power soon enough."

"And you take her away to-morrow, madame?" asked the Frenchman of Mrs. Lyle.

"Yes, to-morrow. Some friends of mine who go every winter to San Remo have told me of an excellent school. I think of leaving my young charge there for two years, then letting her have a year in Paris. I almost wish she were younger," she added in English. "She does not take kindly to the idea of discipline."

"How old is she?" enquired the American.

"She must be fifteen, as near as I can calculate," answered Mrs. Lyle. "She was two years old at the time of the accident."

"Does she remember anything about it?"

"I fancy not. She has not said so."

Meanwhile the French count had moved across the room to the girl's side, and was whispering his delicate and graceful flatteries in her ear.

But the presence of these refined and graceful women had abashed the girl. She coloured, and looked stupid, and half defiant. The Frenchman thought to himself she would have a great deal indeed to learn in three years. She was terribly *gauche*.

He did not find her in the least entertaining, despite the wonderful beauty of her face. He looked critically at her.

"She is not of an age to regard us," he thought to himself. "She is wondering how she can become like those other women, and that they make her feel her ignorance and stupidity as we have no power to do."

Presently Colonel North approached.

"You are used to early hours, I know," he said kindly.

"I think Mrs. Lyle will excuse you now, if you would like to seek your room. We are all going to the Casino."

She flushed scarlet, and rose at once.

Mrs Lyle was the centre of a group by the window. She was talking gaily and with animation. She looked almost beautiful—hers was a face that owed everything to expression.

"Yes, I will go," she said hurriedly; "I am not wanted here," she added, flashing a sullen glance at the laughing women in their elegant dresses and glittering jewels.

Evidently they had all forgotten her. Her beauty and her strange history had only amused them for a brief time. She was quite out of their world, their interests, their sym-

pathies. She recognised this fact, and it annoyed her—it made her feel an ignorant, sea-born savage, and dimmed even her appreciation of the beauty she had seen in herself.

"Yes ; I will go," she repeated, below her breath, and turned abruptly, almost rudely, away.

Her guardian smiled.

"The diamond is somewhat unpolished, is it not?" he said to the Count.

He shrugged his shoulders expressively.

"How it will dazzle one day!" he answered, and in his own mind he added: "And how it will be cold and hard—cold and hard!"

CHAPTER VI.

It was a cold, wet night in Paris in the autumn of the year. The rain had been falling all day, and it was falling still. The heavy-laden clouds lay like a pall over the lighted city, and were reflected in the pools that filled the street, and lay under the dripping trees in the boulevards.

But few people were abroad. Only necessity would compel anyone to face that dreary weather—the necessity born of hunger, and toil, and pain, and misery, that dogs with its shadow the lives of the poor, and the wants of the wretched.

The young ladies at the *pension* of the Demoiselles Montauban were sitting in a somewhat listless and depressed fashion round the wood fire in the schoolroom. They were all very superior young ladies ; well-born, rich, of various nationalities, and extra-refined manners and susceptibilities.

They had all been placed here for that finishing touch to mind, manners, and accomplishments, that only the prestige of a year with the Demoiselles Montauban could bestow.

Most noticeable among the group—only twelve in all—was a girl of some eighteen or nineteen years : a tall, beautifully-formed girl, with the figure of a goddess, and a face of exquisite colouring, and almost perfect features. They were sitting in groups of two or three. The handsome girl was speaking to another in a quick, excited voice.

Everything about her was quick and restless. She seemed overflowing with animal life and spirits ; no one would have recognised in her the rough, half-wild peasant-girl who had shown visitors the ruins of Roquebrune. Three years

had done wonders for her. She had been quick enough in learning things she knew it was necessary to learn—quick, too, in acquiring a certain ease and refinement which she knew was important to her station. But she was not a favourite, either with schoolfellows or teachers; she was too passionate, wilful, and resolute to win love or arouse interest. Thus, great as was her beauty, it was marred by overweening vanity and self-importance. If she had been heiress to as many millions as she was to thousands, she could not have given herself greater airs, or pictured greater luxuries and extravagances for her future.

The girls laughed at her; but many envied her, more especially as she would be comparatively free, for a guardian was different to a parent, or parents; and the handsome Englishman, who came to see her from time to time, was to them an object of the greatest interest.

It was now October, and at Christmas she was to go over to England with Mrs. Lyle. Her education was still imperfect; but she declared herself incapable of acquiring accomplishments, and insisted that a certain amount of music, drawing, and languages was by no means absolutely necessary to a woman's success. With a face like hers much might be excused, and she had certainly enough audacity to verify her words.

Colonel North seemed to agree with her, so Mrs. Lyle said nothing. She saw, only too plainly, that the attractions of the beautiful ward were by no means without their influence on the guardian, and pride withheld any very strong remonstrance on her part.

"Oh, what a night!" cried the beautiful Lilas suddenly, as a fresh burst of wind shook the windows, and the noise of the rain sounded loud and distinct on the paved courtyard beyond the schoolroom.

"Tell us a story, Félice, ti'l the lights come."

"Oh," said the girl addressed, "you have heard my stories—all; and I am not in the mood to invent."

"Lilas is restless this evening, because she has been expecting her guardian and he hasn't come," said one of the other girls.

"No one would come out on such a night unless he was obliged to do so," said Lilas coolly. "He will be here to-morrow, and I shall make him ask for a holiday and take me out."

At this instant the door opened, and a neat-looking servant put in her head.

"A visitor in the *salon* for Mdlle. Dormer," she announced.

Lilas sprang to her feet.

"He has come, despite the weather! Ah, I might have known! He never breaks his word."

She rushed out of the room with a haste and excitement so undignified that her companions laughed a little superciliously.

Meanwhile Lilas had hurried into the little *salon* where the pupils' friends or relatives usually awaited them. She flung open the door impetuously and rushed in, a glad cry of welcome on her lips. But in an instant the cry was checked. She recoiled a step or two, and stood looking in amazement at the figure before her.

The figure of a girl, young as herself, but with a sad and almost haggard face, with large, melancholy eyes, and rough and coarse garments, all wet and stained now with the mud of the streets, and the heavy autumn rain.

Lilas looked at her; then the colour left her face. Something of shame and anger flashed into her eyes.

"Fanchette!" she muttered, and looked around as if fearing anyone should hear. "How did you find me? Why are you here?" she added sharply.

The girl raised her head. She was pale and weary. Marks of suffering and privation were all too plainly stamped on her pallid cheeks and sharpened features.

"I have not seen you for three years," she said timidly. "The other day, when you were walking with the school, you passed me. I followed, and watched you here. I came to-night because—because I have something to tell you—something important."

"You have come to beg, I suppose," said Lilas scornfully. "You are poor and wretched-looking enough. Why did you leave Roquebrune? What are you doing in Paris?"

"The blood flushed to the girl's brow at the insolent tone and words.

"I came to Paris," she said, "to find you. I know your secret."

All the colour seemed to leave Lilas's face. Trembling and ghastly she sank into a chair, her eyes dilated with terror.

"What do you mean?" she asked in a stifled whisper.

Fanchette drew up her slender figure and looked calmly and unflinchingly at the beautiful girl.

"I think," she said coldly, "you know what I mean. Your mother and yourself have played a cruel trick on me. On her death-bed she confessed it all—the priest at Roquebrune took it down, and she signed it. She would never have confessed, I think, but for your neglect and coldness, and utter forgetfulness; for, after all, she was your mother, and you knew it. When I heard the story I could not believe it. It seemed so cruel, so wrong, that you could have robbed me all this time without a regret—that you could have heard my story from your mother's lips, and yet agreed to cheat me of my rights. We were very poor; I could scarcely get money enough to bring me to Paris, and I have been here nearly a week searching for you. Yesterday I changed my last franc. I have had nothing to eat all day—I, who should be in your place; and you knew that, and could deceive me so basely!"

Her voice broke; tears rushed to her eyes. Memories thronged swift and fast in her heart; homely, innocent, childish pictures, when this girl had been to her as a sister—when they had laughed and played under the grey olive boughs and beneath the lemon-trees of Roquebrune.

The injustice, and cruelty, and deception she had met with, inspired her with sudden loathing and disgust. It was beyond her comprehension that anyone could have stooped so low—betrayed so basely. She dashed the tears from her eyes, and looked at Lilas's white and shrinking face.

"What have you to say?" she asked. "You know that I am Lilas Dormer—that all these years you have stolen what was mine—lived and acted a lie, without a sign of regret. Oh, how could you do it—how could you!"

Still Lilas was silent. Her thoughts were all in confusion. A feeling of terrible anger—of fury lashed to boiling point—of undisciplined passion and baffled schemes—these raged and stormed within her heart, and for a moment robbed her of self-control, and almost of reason. She felt that she could have killed this girl where she stood, but for fear of consequences. Give in to her she would not—of that she was determined.

"What you tell me," she said at last, "is a wild, foolish tale. I defy you to prove it. Mère Jeanne confessed that I was Lilas Dormer—she gave the proofs to Mrs. Lyle and

Colonel North. They have proved her story to be true. My father's will left me to the guardianship of Colonel North till I should be twenty-one. That is my story. Who are you that you make this absurd claim, and who will believe it that looks at us?"

She drew herself up to her full height. In the splendid insolence of her beauty and defiance she towered above the shrinking, poverty-stricken figure of the trembling girl.

Fanchette looked at her, startled beyond all words by her audacity.

"Do you mean to say," she gasped faintly, "that you deny this—that you will not give me back my rights?"

"I mean to say," answered the girl slowly and cruelly, "that I shall tell everyone you are an imposter, if you attempt to raise your voice or assert your claim. I mean to say that you will find it impossible to prove your story. I mean to say that I have secured wealth, honour, love, respect, and I am not going to yield them up for the craze of a madwoman or the foolish tale of a child."

Fanchette recoiled, as if a blow had struck her.

"You deny your own mother?" she cried, aghast.

"She was your mother—not mine," said Lilas audaciously. "I defy you to assert the contrary. Where is your proof?"

"This," cried the girl, drawing a folded paper from her bosom, and holding it out. "This—Mère Jeanne's own confession, signed by her own hand, ere she died."

In a second Lilas had sprung forward and snatched the paper from the girl's weak grasp. Then she tore it across, rushed over to the fire, and thrust it in among the burning logs.

With a faint cry, Fanchette saw the flames seize and destroy it before her very eyes.

"Now," cried the young fury triumphantly, "do your worst; I defy you!"

For a moment their eyes met; defiance answering appeal and grief, and despair.

"You know," said Fanchette slowly, "that I am destitute and friendless, and alone in this great city; that you have wronged me and robbed me; that now you have deprived me of my last hope! You know this, and not one softer feeling prompts you to repent your cruelty—not one memory of the days when we were sisters—children, innocent and happy."

Lilas stood there immovable. She never looked at the pleading face—the trembling, outstretched hands. Her cheek was flushed, her bosom heaved with quick, panting breaths; her brain felt dizzy.

“If you don’t leave the house,” she said at last, “I will ring for the servants, and have you thrust forth like the insolent beggar you are!”

That last speech stung the girl’s patient heart and gentle nature beyond endurance.

“Listen,” she said. “You have defied me. You may thank yourself for the consequences. Had you done what was right—had you even been a little sorry, I should not have been hard on you. I was prepared to treat you as my sister—to share with you everything that you restored; to keep your secret from all—the blame would have fallen on your mother, not on you. But, now, you have insulted me—you have denied me—you have added a deeper wrong to those already committed. I shall not trouble you again—have no fear; but I know from whom to seek aid. I will go to the English lady who took you from Roquebrune. She will believe my story, and she will see justice done to me!”

Lilas gave a mocking laugh. Her hand was on the bell.

“The English lady is at the other end of the world!” she said scornfully. “It will not be an easy matter to find her. And I think you told me you had changed your last franc to-day.”

While speaking she rang the bell, the door opened, and the servant appeared.

“Show this young person to the door,” said Lilas, with unsurpassable insolence; “and if ever she comes here again, remember you are not to admit her.”

Then she turned away and swept out of the room, the rustle of her silken skirts dying in the distance, as Fanchette was shut out into the cold and wet of the pitiless streets.

CHAPTER VII.

HEART-BROKEN and despairing, the girl staggered on in a blind and helpless fashion.

One by one those pitiless words came back to her memory bringing fresh pain, and clearer meaning, and a deeper disgust. Never for one moment had she expected such an

answer to her appeal ; never had she doubted but that, her story once known, Lilas would acknowledge her error, and restore her the long-forfeited rights of which she had been ruthlessly defrauded. But now the character of the girl had been suddenly revealed, and she recoiled, even in memory, from the base, and selfish, and unscrupulous nature, to which honour, and affection, and truth seemed as unknown things.

Her frame was weak with long fasting and privation, her limbs trembled under her as she moved along. The cold blasts chilled her, the rain soaked her miserable garments. Heart-sick, friendless, moneyless, she was adrift on the merciless current of Paris life—one of the world's many victims, as ignorant and helpless as a child.

She came at last to one of the bridges that span the Seine. The wind suddenly lulled, and from a rift in the dark and lowering clouds came a faint gleam of moonlight. She saw it fall slantwise across the dusky water—a track of silver amidst surrounding darkness.

Faint and spent, she leant against the parapet and gazed with longing and despair into the depths below.

"There is nothing left but death," she muttered in a half-dazed and stupefied fashion. "I must starve. I cannot beg ; and what can I do here in this great city, without a friend or a roof to shelter me ?"

A cloud drifted over the moon, and all grew dark again ; a fresh blast of wind shook the bridge on which she stood, and tossed her loosened hair in a shower about her shoulders. Just then she heard a step on the bridge, and she made an effort to move on, fancying it might be the guard. But she had miscalculated her strength. The fierce gust had her at its mercy. She staggered, threw her arms out wildly to the darkness that seemed to swoop down on her like a black cloud ; then she fell helplessly like a log on the cold, wet stones of the bridge.

When she opened her eyes again she found herself being driven in a cab through the lighted streets. Confused and terrified, she called out ; she could not think where she was. A kind face looked down at her as the lamps flashed by—a face that somewhere in the mists of memory held a place, and even now, in her weakness and faintness, looked like that of a friend.

"I am glad you are better. I recognised you at once.

Do you remember I saw you at Roquebrune three winters ago? What has brought you to Paris?"

She gave a little cry. She found herself face to face with the English guardian of Lilas.

"Ah," she cried wildly; "surely Heaven has sent you to me. There seemed nothing left but death. No friend—no hope; but now—now——"

Again that deadly faintness came over her. Her head sank back. Colonel North looked almost with terror at those changed and ghastly features. She remained insensible till the cab stopped at his own door.

He sprang out and spoke to the *concierge*, a stout, good-natured woman, to whom he had once rendered a service that made her his debtor for life. In a few hurried words he told her the story, and she agreed to take charge of the girl for that night.

With the assistance of her husband, she carried the light and senseless form into her own clean and comfortable room, and in a short time had restored the girl to animation. She saw that want of food had brought her into this state, and, as soon as she had recovered from her fainting-fit, she made her drink some hot wine, and eat a little bread and meat; then she made up a bed for her, and soon the girl dropped off into a deep sleep, too spent and wearied to question anyone as to this sudden and unexpected change in her circumstances and condition.

In about an hour's time Colonel North came down from his rooms, to enquire after his charge. The woman told him how weak and famished she was; and a great compassion filled his heart as he thought of what she must have suffered—forlorn and helpless, astray in the great wilderness of Paris. He wondered how she had come here, and why? Since that day at Roquebrune he had never seen her. Often and often he had asked Lilas if she did not wish to visit her old home, but she had always refused. She seemed to have no affection for anyone there; and he had attributed it to the anger she felt at Mère Jeanne's deception and treachery.

For his own part, he had always had a kindly feeling for the fair-faced, gentle girl who had talked so frankly to him in the old church, and had such true regret for her cold-hearted companion.

"She must have come here to seek for Lila," he thought,

as he looked at the wan face on the pillow—pale save for two bright spots on either cheek, the precursors of the fever that hunger and exposure and terror had set aflame.

Before morning she was raving in delirium.

He sent for a doctor, and while awaiting his arrival he sat down beside the unconscious girl. She was muttering swift, incoherent words—the babblings of fever. Suddenly something she said roused his attention. He turned pale, and listened with intent and almost fearful interest. Again and again the same appeal—the same iterated reproach.

His heart seemed to stand still as if with sudden dread. He sprang to his feet and paced the room restlessly, with troubled brow and anxious thoughts. Those words had been as a light flashed on long darkness—the revelation of a fear that had slumbered in his heart longer than even he himself had imagined.

Again and again he searched the unconscious face, feature by feature, remembering now what it had recalled—his dead friend's memory. He was burning with impatience for the doctor's arrival. He could learn nothing until he had heard the medical opinion of the girl's condition.

When at last he did hear it, his mind was filled with grave and anxious doubts.

"It will be a long case," said the physician, "and critical. You had better send her to a hospital, I think."

Colonel North shuddered.

"No," he said; "she shall remain here. Send me a nurse, and I will have a room prepared for her. There are two that I never use. She shall have them until she has recovered."

"Do you know her?" asked the medical man in surprise.

Colonel North felt his face grow warm under the keen, surprised glance.

"I knew her when she was a child," he said at last. "I found her starving here in Paris. I know, too, that she has no friends and no means. She must stay here."

"No doubt it will be better for her," said the doctor gravely. "But, I warn you, it will be a long and critical case. She is enfeebled from want and suffering. It will go hard with her. Meanwhile have her removed at once, and I will send a nurse."

He went away marvelling at the eccentricity of Englishmen, who burdened themselves with the care of sick and starving beggars.

"Perhaps, though," he said to himself, by way of solving the puzzle, "there is remorse. One never knows."

For nothing in the world seems so difficult as to credit a good action with pure or disinterested motives.

Through many weary days and nights the girl battled with the pain and danger of a long and critical illness. Often and often had it seemed to those who watched her that she must succumb, that she had no strength to battle against the ravages of fever—the alternate paroxysms and lassitude of its terrible course. During those weeks of suspense Colonel North never once went near his ward. The doubts within him must be set at rest before he could touch the hand, or look on the face of Lilas Dormer.

In the great world of Paris avoidance was easy. He lived on one side of the Seine, she on the other, and he knew very well the hours at which the pupils of the Demoiselles Montauban took their exercise. Sometimes he thought he would write and tell his suspicions to Lesley Lyle, who was in England; but again he checked the impulse. After all, they might mean nothing. It was better to keep silence until he had some clearer proof.

"They could never have dared to trick me so basely," he thought, and the angry colour surged up to his brow.

But for all that, the thought recurred again and again. It could have been done so easily. The girls were almost the same age; and then he remembered how well such a scheme would have served the vengeance, and answered the purpose, of that strange woman. To put her own child in the place of Maurice Dormer's, to win for her the heritage that should have been Fanchette's, would indeed be a brilliant revenge on her faithless lover. He remembered how readily Mrs. Lyle and himself had accepted her word. The proofs certainly were there, but they applied to Fanchette equally as well as to Lilas, and of the two the supposed heiress was far more of the peasant type, despite her beauty.

There was an utter absence of refinement or delicacy in her mind and manners. Again and again had he thought so, despite the charms of her loveliness and audacity. He had never confessed it openly—in fact, he had always defended the girl against Mrs. Lyle's strictures, feeling that such loyalty was her due from the only one of her dead

father's kin, and that all reasonable excuse should be made for her wretched youth and bringing up. But Fanchette had had the same disadvantages, and yet there was nothing coarse about her. He pictured her benefited by the advantages Lilas had received, and found himself wondering what would then be the difference between the two girls.

So he let the days drift on until he received the news that danger was over; nursing and care were all the girl needed. When assured of this, he left Paris to run over to England on a matter of business, and then naturally paid a visit to Mrs. Lyle.

Lesley Lyle had an artistic house in South Kensington, with a large studio attached, where she spent most of her time.

It was to that studio Colonel North was shown when he called. The dull November day was drawing to a close, and Mrs. Lyle was making use of the short hours of daylight still left.

There was a large picture on her easel, and several smaller ones stood about the room.

After greeting her, Colonel North glanced carelessly at her work. It never seemed to him quite right that a woman should work, and he knew Mrs. Lyle was almost a slave to her brush of these late years.

His eye fell suddenly on two small pictures hanging side by side. He started. They were the faces of Lilas and Fanchette. He left his seat, and walked over to where they hung.

He studied the two faces for some moments in silence.

Mrs. Lyle had looked up, and seen his intent gaze fastened on the beautiful Lilas. Her cheek grew pale.

"How the spell works!" she thought bitterly. "Is it like?" she asked at length.

He started at her voice. He had almost forgotten where he was.

"Like? It is life itself," he said at last. Then he moved away, and approached the artist.

"Lesley," he said, "have you the locket with the picture of Lilas's mother?"

She looked surprised.

"Yes," she said. "I asked her to keep it, but she did not appear to care about doing so. Why do you ask?"

"Will you let me see it?" he said eagerly. "Can you get it now?"

"Yes," she answered. "It is in my jewel-case. But why do you wish to see it, may I ask?"

"Fetch it, and I will tell you," he said quickly and imperatively.

She left the room; she was gone some five or six minutes. When she returned she looked troubled and perplexed.

"It is very strange," she said; "I can't find it. I remember perfectly well putting it away in a small box in my jewel-case. The box is there, but no locket."

"Are you sure?" asked Colonel North gravely. "It was not of much value. It could scarcely have been worth anyone's while to steal it. Where do you keep your case?"

"In my wardrobe. It is always locked, and the keys are on my bunch here." She showed him the bunch in her hand. "They are always in my possession," she added. "It is most mysterious."

"Perhaps you may have left them in your pocket," he said. "Who looks after your wardrobe?"

"Célestine; but she is as honest as the day. You know how many years I have had her."

"True," he said; "she was at Monaco with you three winters ago, was she not?"

"Yes, but I have had her seven years altogether."

"And when did you see this locket last?"

"That is difficult to say. The box was there, and I never thought of looking into it. I have had it ever since Lilas went to school. At first I saw a good deal of the locket, for I was copying the face in oils. I made a companion-picture of it to those"—pointing to the girls.

Colonel North's brow cleared.

"Thank goodness for that!" he said. "What a providential idea! Where is the picture?"

She went up to the others, and drew forward a small canvas that had been concealed by a screen.

"Here it is," she said.

Colonel North seized it eagerly. His eyes searched it line by line, feature by feature. Then he turned to his companion.

"Lesley," he said abruptly, "of whom does this remind you?"

"It is my poor friend—Lilas's mother, as near as I can remember her now," she said falteringly. "Why do you ask?"

For all answer he took the little picture of Fanchette from

the nail on which it hung, and put it beside the one he had studied so carefully.

"Now," he said, "tell me if there is a likeness?"

She started. Her eyes gazed intently and absorbedly at her own work.

"I never saw it before," she faltered slowly. "But there is a great resemblance. And yet—and yet, why should there be?"

"Why should there not be?" said Colonel North sternly. "If they are mother and daughter. I believe we have been fooled by a revengeful woman. I believe that Fanchette should be in Lilas's place, and Lilas in Fanchette's, if only the truth were known."

Mrs. Lyle started as if he had struck her.

"Oh," she cried faintly, "you can't mean that! It seems too—too horrible!"

"I mean it," he said slowly. "But how to prove it—that is the difficulty."

She shuddered and drew back.

"All these years?" she said. "Oh, it seems beyond belief. Do you think Lilas knows?"

"No, I am sure of that," he said confidently. "She has been made the innocent victim of that woman's vengeance. She has never suspected a wrong."

"What will you do?" said Mrs. Lyle. "If you can't make the woman confess, proof is impossible. We had trouble enough with the lawyers before; but now——"

"I must appeal to Lilas herself," he said. "She is passionate and wilful, I know, but she is tender-hearted. Besides," he added, his face softening as with some pleasant thought, "she will do anything for me."

That look, those tender words, struck sharp with pain to Mrs. Lyle's heart. Once—long ago—she had won such a look—had heard such words, and now they were for the young and lovely rival whom she herself had dragged from poverty and obscurity.

Her face flushed hotly.

"No doubt," she said, "you are right. You can persuade her easily; and you will not let her suffer, even if she is dethroned."

"Certainly not," he answered; "she will have the greater claim on me; although then I should no longer be her legal guardian."

Mrs. Lyle turned away abruptly. The old fear within

her heart seemed sharpened and intensified by this new revelation. The consciousness of her own jealousy humiliated her. The vision of this girl, her loveliness, her strange history giving her but added interest in the eyes of her guardian, came vividly before her. She looked at the picture on the easel, but her eyes were blind with tears, and the colours seemed all blurred and indistinct.

Presently his voice came to her again.

"I have more to tell you," he said hesitatingly. "The —the other girl is in Paris. I found her starving and homeless one night in the streets. I took her to a place of safety and shelter. She has been very ill—at death's door, they say; but she is out of danger now. I came to see you to-day chiefly to ask you to do me a kindness. Will you receive her for a time, till—till I find out whether there is any just ground for my suspicions? It is asking you a great deal, I know; but we owe her justice, do we not? And, in her delirium, she was always raving of a great wrong done to her, which you could put right, if you only knew of it. For the sake of our past—of our long friendship—will you do this, Lesley?"

The deepening dusk hid her face and the pallor of her cheek, but her voice was steady and sweet as ever when she answered him:

"Of course I will do it. When do you wish me to go to Paris? If the child is ill she could not possibly come here."

"How good you are!" he cried gratefully. "I—I thought, perhaps, you might come back with me to-morrow. There is no time to be lost. But, of course, if you have any engagement——"

"I have no engagement now but work," she said; "I will be ready to accompany you to-morrow."

"Thank you," he said quietly; "and now I will take my leave. Would you mind asking Célestine about that locket? it is very mysterious. And don't remain here any longer this evening; it is so cold and dark."

He touched her hand. Then she rang the bell and the servant showed him out. But Mrs. Lyle still sat on there in the lonely studio for nearly half an hour.

At last she roused herself and looked sadly round. She seemed still to hear the echo of those last words.

"Cold and dark!" she said sorrowfully. "Yes; it is like my life—it is like my life!"

CHAPTER VIII.

COLONEL NORTH had been absent from Paris a week, and that week had made a marvellous difference in the condition and appearance of the sick girl. Slowly out of the mists of pain and fever she gathered the memory of events.

First and foremost among all stood the face and the kindness of her rescuer. She learnt his name and what he had done for her from the lips of the *concierge* and the Sister of Charity who had nursed her; it seemed to her that he had come like an angel of compassion in that hour of weakness and despair when she had almost sought death. That he should have brought her here to his own home, and had her tended so carefully and lovingly, was little short of marvellous in her eyes. All her young and innocent heart went out to him in gratitude and loyalty. It seemed as if nothing she might do could ever repay such generous kindness.

In those first long days of weariness and convalescence she would lie on her couch in absolute content, lulled by the sound of his name—the never-ending histories of his goodness and generosity that the old *concierge* loved to relate.

One morning the woman came to her brimful of excitement.

"Monsieur returns to-day," she said hastily. "He brings a friend, an English lady, who is coming to nurse you and take care of you. So he says."

"An English lady!" faltered the girl.

She trembled and turned very pale. She was still very weak, and the rush of thought attendant on this news almost overpowered her.

If it should be the English lady of Roquebrune—if she could but tell her her story and win the belief that Lilas had so contemptuously refused!

The night of Mrs. Lyle's arrival she was flushed and anxious, and feverish with expectation and fear. It seemed to her that she could hardly expect Lilas's friends to believe her unsupported testimony, and yet to live on here accepting their goodness and generosity was impossible to her.

But gradually the simplicity and candour of her nature prompted her to take the one direct course. If they believed her story, well and good, they would do her justice; if not, she must go back to the dreary, hard-working life, and forget the brief dream of another and far different one that had led her on this will-o'-the-wisp chase to Paris.

She was lying on the couch by the wood-fire; a thick woollen rug covered her slender figure. Her hair, which had been cut short during her illness, curled soft and close about her head, and fell in loose waves on her forehead. She was thin and very pale, save for the faint pink spot that excitement had brought to either cheek. Her eyes looked strangely large for her face.

The door opened and Mrs. Lyle entered. She was alone, and a momentary thrill of disappointment touched the girl's longing heart. She had so hoped to see the kind and handsome face of her preserver.

"Do you remember me, my dear?" asked Lesley Lyle gently, as she stood by the couch and touched the girl's wasted fingers.

"Oh, yes," she answered simply. "It was you who came to Roquebrune and took Lilas away. How long ago it seems!"

"It is only three years," said Mrs. Lyle gently. "And now, tell me how did you come here, and in so terrible a plight? Is—is your mother also in Paris?"

"No," said the girl, growing very pale; "she is dead."

"Dead!" Mrs. Lyle started. "Oh," she cried suddenly, "what a misfortune!"

The girl looked at her in surprise. She felt weak, and faint, and ill at ease. She was scarcely strong enough yet to bear disappointment.

Lesley Lyle threw off her travelling cloak, and seated herself by the girl's side. She had resolved to say nothing yet of her suspicions; of what use to raise false hopes? and proof would be so difficult now.

"You have been very ill," she said presently; "but the worst is over. I am going to nurse you back to health and strength. Can you tell me what brought you to Paris? After that I must not allow you to talk any more to-night."

"I came to see Lilas," she answered hesitatingly.

"And did you see her?" asked Mrs. Lyle somewhat anxiously.

"Yes;" and the slow, shamed colour crept up to the girl's white brow. Her eyes drooped.

"I had a letter from Lilas only last week," said Mrs. Lyle gently. "She says nothing of your visit."

"No," answered the girl slowly; "I did not think she would. She is a grand lady now; she does not wish to have anything to do with me."

"Has she never written to you since she left Roquebrune?" asked Mrs. Lyle.

"Never. We knew nothing of her. Only the priest at Roquebrune found out that she was in Paris, and I came."

"How did she receive you?" asked Mrs. Lyle anxiously.

The girl looked embarrassed. She did not like to relate that interview. The shame that Lilas could not feel for herself kept her lips dumb as its memory swept across her aching brain.

She raised her hands to her brow with a little tired gesture.

"I—I do not think she cares to see me ever again," she said, and the slow, hot tears of wounded pride and wounded love rose to her eyes.

Lesley Lyle bent down and touched the hot forehead with her lips.

"Do not grieve," she said gently. "Your future shall be cared for, even as hers has been. And now you must go back to bed. You look so tired and ill, and a great deal depends on your recovery—more than you imagine."

The words cheered the girl's heart. She smiled up at the beautiful kindly face that had so powerfully attracted her when first she had seen it. Then she took courage, and glanced around.

"He has been so good," she said timidly. "Oh, so good—no one knows. When shall I see him to thank him for all he has done for me?"

"You mean Colonel North?" said Mrs. Lyle. "Well, I fear you will not see him just yet, for he has gone abroad for a little time. But he bade me tell you that he hoped to find you quite well and strong when he returned—that so you could best reward him for his anxiety about you."

"About me!" She flushed scarlet. "I am not worth

a thought of his," she murmured passionately. "Not a thought. I have no right to be here, to burden him as I have done; but perhaps some day I may be able to repay him. I would give my life to do so—indeed, indeed I would."

She turned her head aside, and burst into a passion of tears.

Mrs. Lyle soothed her with gentle words and caresses. "Hush!" she said; "you will make yourself ill again. That will be no repayment. Not that he looks for it. It is his nature to be generous and unselfish."

The girl raised her head and looked up.

"He is your friend," she said hesitatingly. "You have known him long."

"I have known him almost all my life," said Mrs. Lyle quietly.

CHAPTER IX.

If Colonel North had stayed that night in Paris he would probably never have taken the journey on to Monaco as he had now done. But feeling that his doubts and suspicions must be set at rest, he went straight through, and the next afternoon, about half-past five, he found himself at La Condaniene, where he had resolved to put up while making the necessary enquiries at Roquebrune.

That night, after dinner, he strolled up the hill to the Casino, curious to see whether among the flock of winter swallows he could discover any faces he knew.

Nothing seemed changed. Snatches of music reached him from the constantly opening doors of the concert-room, as he loitered in the vestibule to finish his cigar. The same crowd moved to and fro, either hastening to, or retreating from, the gaming-tables beyond. Just so had the crowd hurried to and fro on that last night of his appearance here, when, among the host of eager and impassive faces, he had recognised, to his horror, the lovely, brilliant face of his new ward.

He shuddered as he thought of it. His brow darkened, as he thought of the deception and treachery that might have been making him their sport for these three years.

He felt a strange disinclination to enter the gambling-rooms. He could not tell why, but he was conscious of

the feeling all the same ; conscious, too, that before him floated the serene, pale beauty of a young face—appealing in its innocence, sacred in its misery—vested with such pathos as no other memory had ever held for him, since that passionate and far-off youth that had been wrecked by a woman's fickleness.

He threw away his cigar at last, and entered the music-room. It was very crowded, but he managed to secure one of the red-velvet chairs, and sat down to enjoy the magnificent band.

But his thoughts wavered and grew inattentive ; he found himself contriving, forming, and altering plans for the morrow—wondering how he could startle or alarm Mère Jeanne into a confession—wondering, still more, if there really would be anything to confess.

The music ceased at last ; the audience rose and began to move out. He followed mechanically, and went down the steps and out into the cool and luminous night.

When he reached his hotel, the waiter handed him a telegram that had just arrived. He tore it open. It was from Mrs. Lyle :

“The woman is dead. I fear nothing can be learnt at Roquebrune.”

He crushed the paper in his hand, and went up to his own room.

“The irony of fate !” he muttered. “Here I have come all this way only to learn what I might have learnt a month ago in Paris ! What on earth am I to do now ? I *will* find out the truth.”

Day after day drifted by, and with each came returning strength, and health, and beauty to the sick girl.

Her life now seemed like a dream—serene, sheltered, happy. Mrs. Lyle was so good to her that her whole heart was filled with gratitude ; yet still she had never breathed a word of her secret. She felt as if she dared not. The more she thought of it, the more hopeless it seemed that she could win belief, on such unsupported testimony, in so strange a tale. Her only proof had been ruthlessly destroyed. How could she expect these new friends, kind as they were, to regard her story as anything but a wild

and fevered romance, born, perhaps, of illness and delirium—a base attempt to oust from her rightful place the beautiful and brilliant girl whom they had rescued and believed in so long.

As day by day wore on in the slow, monotonous hours of convalescence, Mrs. Lyle would tell her stories of Lilas, her quickness, her talents, her improved manners and beauty; and, unconsciously to herself, she gave the girl the idea that all these charms had won her guardian's heart; that, in time, he would make her his wife, and so complete the romance whose first page had been begun under the shadows of the old ruins at Roquebrune.

Mrs. Lyle had inbibed this idea herself, so perhaps it was no wonder that she conveyed it in all her conversations respecting Colonel North.

Long years back, when he was only a subaltern, they had been boy and girl lovers, vowing fidelity with all youth's passionate belief—oblivious of time, or change, or destiny. They had parted, and she had wedded another man by force of parental will, and cruel, though well-meant deception. For years she and her girlhood's lover were as strangers. She was rich, free, and still beautiful when again they met. But now circumstances were reversed, and he was cold and unforgiving—she passionately regretful. The old romance had died for ever within his heart, killed by the blow that youth bears so badly—treachery. She met him only as a friend—a clever, interesting, and welcome companion, but with no power to fan the cold ashes of his boyish love to flame once more.

If she had known that in some dim fashion Fanchette had fathomed this long buried sorrow, she would have been amazed and indignant; yet the girl had done so almost in the same hour that Lesley Lyle's unconscious hand struck down the hopes within her. That he—her rescuer, her benefactor, the man who was almost a god in her sight, should have given his generous heart and trust to that traitorous and cruel girl, seemed to her almost incredible. But she made no sign; she only lay there silent and still, while in the winter dusk the soft, sweet voice of Lesley Lyle related the charm worked upon him by the beauty and witchery of his ward.

Those words in the studio had only confirmed Mrs. Lyle's belief. Rich or poor, peeress or peasant, this girl

of Roquebrune would always retain her charm in his eyes. Who could wonder at it? She was so lovely!

Half unconsciously she said this, and Fanchette, leaning listlessly there against the soft cushions, echoed them with an envy of which she had never believed herself capable.

"Yes, she is so lovely!"

Mrs. Lyle looked quickly up. The girl's face was in shadow, but something in her voice struck strangely upon her ear.

"I wish," she said, "you would tell me of that interview you had with Lila here in Paris. I have never dared to ask you yet. I feared it might distress you. You said she was not glad to see you. Did she know what trouble you were in?"

Fanchette was silent. A sudden impulse, heroic and irrational as only a very young, and very innocent, and very tender heart could conceive, had come to her.

Revenge lay close at hand, but it seemed to her almost a base and cruel thing to deal pain to the generous heart that had befriended her.

She was very young and very ignorant; she had only the instincts of her own nature to guide her, but they were brave and true, and worth a thousand logical reasons, such as worldly teaching could have bestowed.

"He loves her—he believes in her. It would hurt him to know." That was all she told herself again and again. So, quietly and coldly, she answered that searching question:

"She could not know. I saw her rich, happy, beloved. I felt at once what a gulf there was between us, and I knew I had no claim on her. We were sisters no longer. I had gained all I wished. I had seen her—that was enough."

Enough! How bitterly true were her words! Their unconscious irony touched her even as she spoke them.

There was a long silence. Then Mrs. Lyle bent nearer her, and took her thin and wasted hand.

"My dear," she said gently, "it has often seemed to me that, had you been in Lila's place——"

"Oh, no, no!" came swiftly and affrightedly from the girl's lips. "Do not say that—do not think it. I—I could never have filled it as she has done. I am poor, coarse, common, ugly. She—she looks like a queen."

"She let you go forth into the streets of Paris knowing you were friendless and alone," said Mrs. Lyle coldly. "I can never forgive her that."

"Oh, but you must," cried Fanchette eagerly. "How could she tell? How could she know? She might have thought I had a home and work. No doubt she did. I—I only said I had come to see her."

"Well," said Mrs. Lyle gravely, "I can soon verify your good opinion of her, for I am going to ask her to come and see you."

The girl's face grew ashy with sudden terror. She shivered as she lay there among the soft rugs.

"Please do not," she said eagerly. "I—I would rather not see her—not yet at least. Only, if you are going to her, perhaps you would take a little note—just a message I want to give her. Then—a little later, perhaps, she will come. I am not strong yet, and she—she would be so sorry about that night."

"Just as you please," said Mrs. Lyle; but in her heart she was thinking: "Something passed between them that night—I am sure of it. I must try to find out what it was."

CHAPTER X.

DURING the long, dark hours that intervened between midnight and dawn, Fanchette lay awake and restless on her bed.

She was still very weak; it was difficult for her to think clearly; but that foolish and generous resolve only grew stronger and more resolute.

"He saved me; he gave me back life when I was starving and homeless; he has been as an angel of mercy. How can I make him so base a return?"

This was the current of her thoughts, and it could not be stayed or altered in its course. In her passionate gratitude she thought only of him—of all she owed him—of all he had done for her. He had given her back life, and that life should be his in recompense. It would be a strange return indeed to dash the cup of happiness from his lips a second time! Then she thought of Lilas, accusing herself of rousing that hot and wilful temper by her own want of tact.

"I did not go the right way to work; I should have

remembered how strong was the temptation. And how—oh, how could I have expected her to go back now to the peasant life—the common, mean, sordid existence which had drifted far away into a dim and unpleasant memory ! And if she loves him—as she must—how could she bear to seem shamed and beggared in his eyes.”

So in this unwise and exaggerated manner did she excuse the girl who had duped and insulted her ; so in the frame of mind into which these thoughts had brought her, did she pen the brief and simple note which Mrs. Lyle next day placed in Lilas’s hands.

“ I have said nothing ; your secret is safe, for sake of the good and generous man who loves you. Only I pray you be honest and faithful to him. That is all I ask. And if you would see me once, I should be glad. Then I will go back to Roquebrune, and trouble your life no more.

FANCHETTE.”

Mrs. Lyle gave the note to Lila, saying nothing of the sender, and carefully watched her face as she read it. It betrayed intense agitation.

For a moment she could not believe in its sincerity. That this girl should be safe in the care of the very people who would best serve and aid her, yet be loyal enough to keep her secret and suffer in her stead, seemed absolutely incredible. Then suspicion darted in. Was this only a trap to catch her, after all ? She threw the letter contemptuously into the flames, then turned and met Mrs. Lyle’s grave and searching eyes.

“ So Fanchette is with you ? ” she said. “ How did you find her ? ”

“ Colonel North found her astray and starving in the streets,” said Mrs. Lyle coldly. “ She came to you. How could you allow her to face the perils and horrors of Paris without an attempt to aid her ? ”

The girls face grew sullen.

“ How could I tell she was starving ? ” she said insolently. “ She forced herself in here and made me a scene, and then went away.”

“ A scene ! ” interrupted Mrs. Lyle quickly. “ What about ? ”

Lilas glanced at her, half afraid, half defiant. She

wondered how much it would be safe to tell ; she felt that the ground on which she stood was insecure and uncertain.

" Oh, about my forgetting her and Mère Jeanne. Much I had to thank them for ! "

" I suppose," said Mrs. Lyle quietly, " you have always felt as if you were born to be a princess ? "

The girl coloured and looked uncomfortable.

" I felt," she said, " that the life of my childhood was one I could never be content with. Oh, how glad I was to get away from it—how glad ! "

" Still," persisted Mrs. Lyle, " you might have given a thought sometimes to Fanchette. She, at least, never wronged you. Will you come and see her now ? She is very ill, and I think she would be glad of it."

Again the hot colour came into the girl's cheeks. She hesitated. She was afraid to see Fanchette—afraid to meet her in presence of her guardian, and she thought he surely must be in Paris.

" Where is Colonel North ? " she asked at last.

Mrs. Lyle looked at her in surprise.

" Did he not tell you ? " she said. " He has gone to Monaco."

" To Monaco ! " faltered the girl, turning pale. " No, I did not know. Will he stay there long ? "

" As long as it will require to make certain enquiries at Roquebrune about the death of Fanchette's mother," was Mrs. Lyle's answer.

There was no mistaking the look of terror now in Lila's face.

" Fanchette has deceived me," she thought fiercely. " She has said something, or why should my guardian have gone there ? "

But she mastered herself with a violent effort, and turned once more to Mrs. Lyle.

" I will come and see her," she said, " if you think she wishes it, and if Mdlle. Montauban permits."

" I will arrange that," said Mrs. Lyle quietly. " Will you come to-morrow ? They can send you in a cab, and I will bring you back."

And so it was arranged.

" You must please let me see her alone," said Fanchette, when she heard from Mrs. Lyle that Lilas was coming. The

prospect of the visit seemed to agitate her very much—so much, indeed, that Mrs. Lyle grew uneasy; but more than ever was she convinced that something strange and mysterious had passed between the two girls. Yet she told herself it was hardly possible that Fanchette could even suspect what Colonel North and she had fancied. Mère Jeanne's secret must have died with her.

When Lilas at last entered the room, she watched keenly the meeting between Fanchette and herself. Both were, however, thoroughly calm and self-possessed, and with a little sense of disappointment, she rose to leave them together.

"Fanchette has something to say to you in private," she said. "But I will return in a quarter of an hour. Do not let her get excited. She is still very weak."

Then she went away and closed the door. Lilas followed, and drew the heavy *portières* over it. The sick girl saw the action, and smiled bitterly.

"Do not be afraid of eavesdroppers," she said; "you are among people of honour."

Lilas made no answer, only walked back to the couch, and stood there looking down on the white face and delicate features of her childhood's friend.

"Well," she said at last, "luck has befriended you, I see. Is it true my guardian picked you up in the streets, or did you force yourself into his home?"

The white face crimsoned at the taunt.

"You know well enough how I came here," she said. "But for him I should have died that night, of hunger, and cold, and misery!"

The look in Lilas's eyes said she would not have regretted that catastrophe. The sick girl read it and smiled bitterly.

"I know you hate me," she said, "and I know you will think me a fool; but for all that I am going to keep the promise of my letter. It is not for your sake, though—do not fancy that; but for one so great, and good, and generous that I cannot bear to pain him. I am his debtor for life. I cannot make the first use of that life to wound his trusting heart and destroy his happiness. Lilas, is it true that—that he loves you?"

A strange look of triumph came over the hard and beautiful face.

"I—I think so," she said. "But how did you guess? He has said nothing, even to me, yet."

"I gathered it from Mrs. Lyle's words," answered Fanchette slowly; "and then I made up my mind. If you choose to deceive him willingly, you may do so. You need have no fear of me; I will keep your secret and forego my rights."

Lilas stared at her stupidly; she was baffled and puzzled. She could not understand anyone acting in this fashion, and began to wonder whether some deep plot did not lurk beneath these words. The possibility of anyone being noble enough for such renunciation did not suggest itself to her for a single moment. She was far too incapable of such an act to credit anyone else with the possibility.

She sank down in the low chair by the fire. The bright gleams played on the cashmere and velvet of her pretty toilette—all the dainty accessories that wealth had given to her beauty. Fanchette sighed as she looked. It seemed to her no wonder that he should love her—he, so brave, and great, and set apart in her childish fancy as a being altogether of another world than the commonplace and sordid one she alone had known.

"Listen," she said at last. "I am weak and ill, and sometimes I think I shall not live long to trouble you. It would be better that I did not, though, indeed, you need have no fear of me. What I have said, that I will do. Only promise me you will be faithful and true to him in all else. He has been good to me with the goodness of an angel. I cannot bear to think his life may be unhappy. And so much will be in your power if—if he loves you."

Lilas sat there, silent still. Silent, and languid, and untouched, though her heart leapt with joy at her easy victory, though life looked suddenly sweet and rich as a conqueror's triumph.

The simplicity, and bravery, and strength of this nature were as a dead letter to her. She had no key to their meaning—she could not read them by any light of her own feelings, or her own comprehension.

But at last she looked up.

"I am glad," she said, "that you have come to your senses. On the occasion of our last meeting you had nothing but threats and accusations for me. I suppose, now, you think it is wiser to make terms. Well, how much am I to pay for your silence? Not that I fear your speak-

ing. Your story, without proof, is simply ridiculous. My guardian would not believe it for a single moment."

Fanchette raised herself from her pillows—stung and outraged by so base a reception of her sacrifice. The worthlessness and cruelty of this girl's character came back to her memory again, as she had seen it revealed on the occasion of their last meeting. For a moment she asked herself if she were acting rightly to save her from condemnation and from justice. For a moment it seemed that the life she so revered would assuredly regret the very passion that now enslaved it, if he but once saw this girl's character as she saw it.

The scorn and rage in her heart almost terrified herself, yet still she held her panting soul in check a moment longer.

"Your words are an insult," she said; "and you know it. As for proof—if I chose to tell my story to your guardian, he would not ask for proof."

Lilas grew suddenly pale.

"Is it you then," she said, "who have sent him to Roquebrune?"

"To Roquebrune!" faltered the girl. "I did not know he was there."

"But he will not learn much," said Lilas scornfully, "for Mère Jeanne is dead. Only it is as well you should know how useless it is to play the hypocrite with me."

Then passion and indignation let loose their fiery flood in Fanchette's patient heart. The blood flew in a wild current to her throbbing brow—her pulses beat like hammers. With a strange, passionate strength she sprang up and seized Lilas's arm.

"How dare you!" she cried. "Oh, how dare you! You *shall* believe me! Say that you do, or I will tell them all—all that you have done—all that you have said—the cruelty—the treachery—the lies——"

Then suddenly her voice broke; she staggered back and fell face forwards on the couch, the blood gushing from her mouth.

For a moment the wildest terror seized Lilas. She tried to lift the motionless figure, but had not strength to do it. Then she screamed aloud for help, and at the same instant the door was flung open, and Mrs. Lyle entered. She was followed by Colonel North.

Something in his look struck Lilas to the heart. She cowered down beside the couch, weeping and trembling like the guilty creature she felt herself to be.

Her guardian motioned her sternly aside. Then he rang the bell for the Sister who had been nursing Fanchette.

For a moment all were intent on staunching the blood and reviving the unconscious girl. At last she opened her eyes. They met the anxious, tender gaze of that idealised hero who had seemed to her young and innocent mind as a god. Her own flashed up light, and love, and welcome.

"You!" she said faintly; then her head fell back, her limbs trembled and were still.

He bent over her in a terror of longing and dread.

"Fanchette!" he cried; "my child, look up—listen! I have such good news for you! I have learnt your story at last. "Great Heaven!" he murmured in sudden horror, "she does not look, or move. Can't she hear?"

The sister drew him gently away.

"She will hear no earthly voice again," she said solemnly. "Your good news has come too late."

He shuddered as he turned away, and for a moment covered his face with his hands. He could have thrown himself down, and wept like a woman, as he thought of the young and sorrowful life that had drifted away now on that dark and unknown sea whose waters none may fathom.

"Too late!" he cried at last, dropping his hands, and turning almost fiercely to Lilas, who, pale and horror-struck, stood there beside the motionless form.

"It would not have been too late if she had been left alone. Who has done this? What have you said to her, you who sent her to death once, and have brought it to her now?"

Lilas shivered with terror. Her audacity had all forsaken her. The suddenness and horror of this scene had almost deprived her of thought or speech.

She shrank away from that angry and indignant face. Her lips trembled, but no words came. He took her arm and led her from the room into the one adjoining. Then he closed the door and stood before her, stern, accusing, relentless as a judge.

"Listen," he said; "I have but just returned from

Roquebrune. Do you know what took me there? The pitiful, unconscious confession, made by the girl you have wronged and now murdered. I seemed to see at once, clear and plain as daylight, the miserable imposture of which you and your mother have been guilty. You took the place of Lilas Dormer, and duped me into accepting you as my ward. Do you dare deny it?"

Her ashy face, her guilty, cowering look, were proof enough of the truth of his words. But her tongue seemed paralysed—speech was impossible.

"I have found out all," he went on fiercely—"all—though you thought all proof destroyed, as that wretched woman's confession was destroyed; though you bribed Mrs. Lyle's maid to steal the portrait of your supposed mother, that we might not compare it with Fanchette; though you turned this girl starving and homeless into the pitiless streets to die of cold and hunger. Faugh! it sickens me to speak to you! Young as you are, you are steeped in evil and deceit. You would trick me still, even by the death-bed of your victim, if you could. Will you deny this—will you tell me that dead lips breathe no tales, and that the confession of your treacherous mother is only a heap of ashes? You are audacious enough to do that. But you forgot there might be a living witness to that document. The priest at Roquebrune knew of it, and drew it up. Have you anything to say now?"

She cowered abjectly in her chair, seeing too late her folly and blindness—seeing her brilliant, beautiful life torn from her in the very hour of its promised security.

No; she had nothing to say. Truth confounded her—truth learnt in so sudden and unexpected a fashion—revealed as if by Heaven itself, when all looked so safe and sure before her.

Seeing her so crushed and abject, his anger grew less fierce.

"I will take you back to the school now," he said, "and I will say nothing of this—yet. But remember, whatever provision I make for your future is for the sake of the dead girl who loved you so unselfishly—not for one tender memory that you have won or deserved from me."

"And now you have no ward," said Mrs. Lyle to Colonel North, some weeks after these events, as she sat once more

in the pretty studio of her house in Kensington. "Are you not sorry. It seems hard to lose both."

"The same fate has befallen you," he said quietly. "Both our lives are rather empty."

"I always thought," she said, "that Lilas would one day fill yours—that you had grown to love her with other than a guardian's love."

His brow grew stern. He rose and paced the room with restless steps.

"Lesley," he said, "I have loved but one woman all my life. She was weak and faithless once, but perhaps"—and he paused beside her, and took the brush from her quivering fingers—"perhaps that only showed she was a—woman. Is it so?"

"She has repented that folly every hour of her life since," came faint and trembling from Mrs. Lyle's lips.

Suddenly he bent down and touched them with his own.

"Life is too short to be unforgiving," he said gravely.

"That dead girl's fate might teach us that. Shall we fill these empty lives with—each other, Lesley?"

She trembled greatly. She could not believe he was in earnest. She who, for three cold, bitter years, had given him up to the charms and fascinations of a younger and lovelier rival.

"Oh," she cried, "are you sure? Are you quite sure? I could not accept from pity what was once so truly mine. I lost it by my own weakness and folly. I have relinquished all hope so long."

"Hope is hard to kill," he said tenderly. "And have we not suffered enough and learnt enough to make us pitiful and forgiving. Does not this story of vengeance overreaching its own purpose, teach us a wise lesson?"

"Yes," she said, "it does. The fate of those two girls is an unspoken irony—a mockery of human purpose."

"So it brings some happiness to my life at last," he said, "I will pardon its bitterness. Will not you?"

A wonderful glow and softness came over the proud, womanly face. She stretched out her hands to him.

"I could forgive anything," she said, "that gave you back to me!"

* * * * *

So the romance which had so interested the Comte de Bris, ended very differently to what he had expected.

"Good-Bye."

CHAPTER I.

"What are we waiting for, you and I."

WHYTE-MELVILLE.

"THEN you'll be afther takin' it, ma'am ?"

"Yes ; I will see the agent to-morrow morning and make all the necessary arrangements."

The door closed. A tall figure passed out into the cool spring dusk—a woman's figure, graceful, slender, and youthful to all appearance, a figure that was watched by two careless half-amused eyes from the studio-window above.

The owner of the eyes turned away as the figure disappeared, and looked expectantly at the door. It was soon opened by a woman, middle-aged, and with a pleasant face, who stood hesitating on the threshold as if awaiting permission to enter.

"You may come in, Dillon," said the occupant of the room as he began thrusting away brushes and paints in a careless fashion peculiar to himself. "My work's done for to-day. For the matter of that so's the light. Well—have you let?"

"Yes, sir. And a nice pleasant-spoken lady she is. She was delighted with them rooms, sure enough."

"*The* rooms, Dillon," corrected the young man laughingly. "Keep to your brogue if you like, but spare me English errors too. Well, what was the lady like? as we are going to be neighbours, I should like to know."

There was just the slightest suspicion of an Irish accent in his own voice ; but the voice itself was so pleasant, had such a hearty ring of youth and good-humour in its clear frank tones, that more critical ears than worthy Mrs. Dillon's would have liked to listen to it on equally small excuse. A "chat" with Terence O'Hara was a treat in its way to that good woman, and one which the young fellow himself often granted even when the precious hours of daylight rebuked him for neglecting them.

"Like, sir ! indeed, that's a hard matter to say. She was purty-looking enough, and had two eyes that for the softness

o' them, could only be matched by that velvety-looking stuff as all the ladies are mad to have jackets of now. What's this they're callin' it? Sure a lady that was here to see you only this week that's gone, had a cloak of it right down to her heels."

"Sealskin you mean. Oh, Dillon, what an original you are. Sealskin eyes! By Jove, they'll be worth looking at!" and he laughed aloud.

"I don't know that the name matters much," said Mrs. Dillon. "But that's what they looked like to me. And her smile—it was as swate——"

"Sweet, Dillon—sweet. Why don't you do more credit to my teaching. Sealskin eyes and a sweet smile—quite an alliterative picture. And she's taking the studio next mine?"

"Thru for you, sir, she is. And she asked many a question about yer honour; and was ye young or old: had ye been long here. Why, sir, you and she will have this floor all to yourselves. You can be quite company like for each other."

"You dreadful old plotter," laughed the young man. "In all probability we shall never set eyes on each other, she will do her work and I shall do mime. By the way, do you know her name?"

"I do not, sir. She didn't lave it; it's the agint she's going to, you know, that will have the letting of the rooms. She didn't say much to me, only that she is goin' to take them."

"And I shall have a neighbour at last. Hurrah! Bring me up some tea, Dillon, on the strength of it, and we'll drink her health."

He pushed aside his easel, and went over to the fireplace, where some logs of wood were burning. Terence O'Hara had a horror of coals, and their attendant smoke and dust. As he stirred the fire into a brighter blaze, and the glow of light fell on his face and figure, Mrs. Dillon's eyes rested on him with an admiration that had at least the merit of sincerity. Most women's eyes did rest upon him with some such expression, for there was something irresistibly winning and attractive about the young fellow. The tall slight figure had that natural grace of action which makes every attitude easy and unconstrained—a something to which the baneful stigma of "awkward" could never be applied. The face might not be strictly handsome, in one sense of the word, but there was a resist-

less charm in the sunny eyes, the frank smiling mouth, the broad brow, where the soft brown hair lay in such careless waves, the whole bright *débonnaire* expression. He looked as if sorrow had never touched him, as though care were a thing unknown. He stood on the threshold of life, looking out on it with laughing eyes and glad heart. Neither very rich, nor very famous, nor very great, but happy as all young life is, ere the deeper lessons of pain and sorrow have saddened its hours with trouble, or burdened its memory with regret.

Mrs Dillon brought the tea, and set it on a small table by his side. He looked at her, as he leant lazily back in his chair, that light in his sunny eyes which was almost a smile deepening into quizzical amusement.

"Any more cups broken?" he asked.

"Sorra a one, sir," she answered, lapsing into the brogue again, in the eagerness of her denial; "and it's only two I have broken this month past, and that's not so bad at all; and one of them 'twas yourself cracked. Is it some toast I'll be making you, sir? Its a purty enough fire, though not a blessed turf on it, more's the pity."

"Yes; make me some toast," said the young man lazily. "You're determined to turn my studio into a kitchen in course of time, Nora. 'Twas only the other day you poached me some eggs here. Fancy how scandalised some of my customers would be if they discovered me enveloped with such terribly prosaic surroundings."

"Yer wurds are moighty grand, barrin' their want o' sinse," answered the good woman coolly, as she went down on her knees before the clear blaze, armed with toasting-fork and bread. "And why do ye talk of customers? Sure, it's not buying and selling that's your trade."

"Selling—it certainly is," he said, laughing. "I can't afford to buy. Do you know I'm awfully poor, Nora?"

"And your father such a grand rich gentleman, as anyone in the south of Ireland can swear to? Don't be afther tellin' me that, sir!"

"It's true enough," he said, with a quick hard laugh. "His riches don't affect me at all. I have to earn my own living in my own way. The way is pleasant enough, but the earnings don't come up to my expectations. Still, I suppose I sha'n't starve yet awhile."

"A clever young gentleman like yourself! The saints bless us and kape us—it's not you and want'll be shaking

hands with each other this many a day, I'm thinking," said Mrs. Dillon, rising from her knees, with flushed face and carefully browned toast.

She then proceeded to butter it, and pour out the tea, performing all her self-appointed services with an evident pleasure in the performance that seemed to afford infinite amusement to the young man. Fortunately—or unfortunately—for himself, he had always been spoilt by women : always had their love and care and ministry at his service, for no ostensible reason, apparently, save that his manner had a singular charm, that those blue eyes could look so winningly and caressingly from under the shade of their black lashes. Worthy Nora Dillon was simply portress, or caretaker, of the set of studios recently built in a West End suburb of London, but she performed manifold services for Terence O'Hara that in no way came under the heading of her duties, and that most assuredly he had never asked for, though he was wise enough in his generation to accept them as freely as they were offered.

He had been three months in this studio of his—months that had been spent in fitful spurts of work, or hours of dreamy idleness. A picture he had sent up to the Academy the previous year had been the rage of the season, and brought him into immediate notice. Critics had praised it ; engravers had engraved it ; purchasers had bid for it ; finally he had sold it for a sum far exceeding his expectations ; and, on the strength of his success, had left his dreary room in Soho and come West to some newly-built studios, large, commodious, and with that north light so beloved of painters. Here he had begun work again, fired by an ambition to do even greater things than he had yet achieved. His picture for the forthcoming exhibition was almost completed. He had worked hard, even if fitfully. He leant back now in his chair, sipped his tea with lazy content, and listened to Nora Dillon's pleasant chatter with good-humoured amusement.

"On the whole, it's rather a pity to have my solitude disturbed," he murmured absently. "I used to go backwards and forwards in those empty rooms, and fancy I was monarch of all I surveyed. I wonder what makes the woman take a studio ? She ought to paint in her own house."

"Maybe it's in lodgings she is, and the people don't care for messin' and clanin' after her," suggested Mrs. Dillon.

"Maybe ye're right," mimicked young O'Hara. "By the way, Nora, were you ever in love?"

"In love!" echoed Mrs. Dillon, looking at her questioner with unfeigned amazement. "And what's afther putting that in your head, me dear?"

"Oh, I don't know. Tell me."

"Well, you see," answered Mrs. Dillon slowly, and looking with a sort of bashful confusion into the fire. "It's a mighty hard thing to say. Sure, when I met Pat Dillon—faith, and he a pleasant-spoken impudent-looking divil as iver was—I thought I was in that same state—and a mighty quare and onpleasant state it was too—for what with me heart goin' pit-a-pat ivery time I saw him a-comin', and me head all topsy-turvy thinking did he think o' me at all, at all, and the broken heads he'd give the other boys if they'd so much as walk the common wi' me, and all the pother and botheration as he gave to me feelins—I was just obliged to say 'Yes' for pace and quietness."

"And then you married Pat?"

"I did that same. But sure ye may just as well be makin' use o' the taypot, since it's here, sir. There's a good sup in it yet?"

"Very well, give me some more. Your tea's as good as yourself, Nora. And where's Pat now?"

"In Ameriky," responded Nora briefly.

"Oh," murmured Terence, raising his eyebrows. "What's he after there?"

"Saints alive, and it's little enough I know of his raysons or himself," answered Nora loftily. "He'd be makin' a fortin, he told me, and then he'd come back. It'll be a long day, I'm thinkin', that he'll stop there to do that."

"Why did you leave Ireland, Nora?"

"Sure, and wasn't me parints dead, and Pat away over the says, and hard enough to get the bite and sup for one mouth, let alone three, and so I and the childer came over here; and the saints be praised for all the luck that's come to me, and the kind friends that I found, though my heart's warm still for the owld country, and only that Pat's not come back yet, it's he and I'd be goin' there to-morrow."

"And that's all your experience of love," mused Terence O'Hara. "And your verdict seems to pronounce it unsatisfactory, Nora."

"Don't ye be afther tryin' it yerself, sir," urged Nora stringently. "Kape out o' that pickle as long as ye can."

"GOOD-BYE."

ely to die of it anyway like thim people in
Only there's no knowin'."

Nora," laughed Terence. "There's no

curse thing than fallin' in love, me dear,"

— Nora, taking up the tea-tray as she spoke, and
moving slowly away through the evening shadows of the
dusky room.

"Indeed?" questioned the young man, looking up from
the fire. "And what may that be, Nora?"

"Marryin', for sure."

The door closed on her retreating figure, and shut out
too the sound of the merry laugh that followed her words.

"Not much fear of my doing either," said the occupant
of the room as he rose and pushed aside his chair, and then
threw aside his painting-coat and left the studio for the day.
"Not much fear, indeed," so ran his thoughts as he walked
swiftly through the quiet streets. "Love—a dream for
poets, a folly for schoolboys, an idyll for empty summer hours.
I do not think it can ever seriously affect one's life for all
that people say. I am sure it wouldn't ever effect mine."

And the smile was on his lips and in his eyes still.

It did not seem very long before the empty rooms
adjoining Terence O'Hara's were fitted up and inhabited;
not very long before a woman's steps might be heard at
intervals on the floor, or ascending or descending the un-
carpeted stairs that led to the general entrance; not
very long either before Terence's longing to catch a glimpse
of his neighbour had been answered by some chance,
kind or otherwise, bringing them face to face one spring
morning at that same entrance-door; not very long either,
and that was the strangest part of all, before the young
painter found himself listening with ever-increasing eager-
ness for the echoes of those footsteps, and marvelling about
them as they came and went, and seeming in a way to trace
her occupations by those movements. Nor, again, was it
long before a courteous bow or word ended in a little more
than empty courtesies, till the fellowship of a profession
shared in common, and the sympathy of tastes and thoughts
conjointly employed, broke asunder, one by one, the con-
ventionalities of ordinary life and placed them on a different
footing towards each other; and then the echoes seemed

to tell a sweeter story, and the woman's heart beat quicker, as the firm tread of the man passed the door, and the man's ears listened more intently for the sounds which had once held no meaning. The weeks drifted by, sweet with the breath and bloom of early spring, and still through the long bright hours the echoes of those footsteps came and went.

The woman sat or stood before her easel, and worked steadily and well; her art was the sole occupation of a lonely life, the only passion on which her full heart and poet fancies spent themselves.

Sorrow and pain were no strangers to her; but it seemed as if suddenly there had come a pause and rest in her life—a time when even memory grew less bitter, and its dark shadows fell slowly one by one into the mists of the dead past. Her work went on through that glad spring time—went on all the better it seemed to her, for the cheery counsels and pleasant words of that young frank voice, for the unconventional comradeship which drifted gradually and imperceptibly into something more akin to friendship than either were quite aware of. And still the echoes came and went, and still the golden hours seemed fair and peaceful and unclouded, though there were times now when the brush fell from her hands, and in the echoes sounded something far-off and strange, and full of sweet promises, something that stirred her heart too much for perfect peace, and filled the mournful eyes with dreams, that broke like troubled waves across this sweet content, and sometimes were so still and sweet that tears would rise to those same eyes, and shut out the pictured scenes on which they gazed.

So much for the echoes of the two studios. Now for something of the histories that were to be interwoven with those echoes.

Lesley Rochford was a widow. She had been early wedded to a man many years her senior, a worthless spendthrift, who had contrived to dazzle her father's eyes with a pretence of great means, and, having secured the girl and her fortune, had ill-treated the one and squandered the other, long before he made the only reparation possible, and by his death gave her at least freedom from misery and brutality. At twenty three years of age Lesley Rochford found herself alone in the world, and almost penniless; but poverty and friendlessness came almost as a relief after the misery of the past years, and being gifted and intelligent and brave of

heart, she set to work to maintain her independence, and succeeded even beyond her expectations. If Providence helps those who help themselves, certainly Lesley Rochford's career amply verified the truth of the adage. Beginning by small things she ended in great. Great, that is to say, in the opinion of those to whom success meant everything.

She painted a female head, and the art-world raved about it; but the art-world also would insist upon endless repetitions of that female head, and believe in nothing else from the pencil or the brush of the mysterious L. R. Orders flowed in from dealers, and requests from publishers of magazines and illustrated papers; but always that head was in requisition, and Lesley Rochford grew a little tired of this endless repetition of one success. After three years she went to Rome, and studied long and assiduously, losing herself in the mightiness and wonders of past ages—all the elements of faith and poetry and imagination working out the artistic faculties of her nature, giving to her a cloudless and absorbing happiness, which asked nothing of life save the content and peace that had usurped the place of human ties and human passions.

When at Rome she painted a picture which raised her a great many steps higher on the ladder of fame than the female heads had done, though even then the world was more slow to believe in it than if its faith in the heads had not been so very assured.

She left Rome and came back to England, and there saw those newly-built studios, and was charmed with their aspect and size, and general convenience; and, being quick of decision, and unfettered by other people's wishes or opinions, had taken one set of them, and there established herself, meaning to work harder and better than ever. That was her history up to the present moment.

And then ?

Then the echoes came into her life. Let them tell the rest.

CHAPTER II.

Good-bye, summer ! Good-bye, good-bye !

—WHYTE-MELVILLE.

"AND I have no umbrella," said Lesley Rochford, looking somewhat ruefully up at the face of her fellow-painter as he joined her at the entrance. "What a downpour !"

They had both shut up their studios for the day, and Mrs. Rochford on opening the outer door found the rain descending in torrents, and was standing hesitatingly on the threshold as Terence O'Hara joined her.

"No more have I," he answered, "and this rain is not going to stop in a hurry. Let us go back and wait till it's over. Stop a minute, I'll call out to Nora to bring us up some tea. You won't object to a cup, I daresay."

"No, I am very tired," said Lesley Rochford as she closed the heavy door and slowly ascended the stairs again. A half-amused smile crossed her lips as she heard the colloquy going on between Nora and her compatriot, then there was the quick run upstairs she knew so well, and he was by her side once more.

"Come into my room, do," he said persuasively, "and we can have some music. It is ages and ages since you honoured me with a visit."

"That promise of music is very alluring," she said, her lips involuntarily answering his own smile as he unlocked the studio-door. The room was half in shadow. His easel stood in its accustomed place by the window. There was only a small sketch upon it. The great picture had been sent up for the Academy.

The room was of fair size, and even its untidiness had something picturesque and artistic about it. The dark, stained-wood floor had a few rugs tossed carelessly here and there for covering. Old armour, quaint china, and bronzes were about the walls; two or three low lounging-chairs were the only seats; a piano stood in one corner, and a guitar, with its scarlet ribbon trailing on the floor lay beside it.

Outside, the sky looked grey and clouded, the rain still swept down with a fierce steady persistence that seemed to threaten long continuance. The young man drew his most comfortable chair forward for his visitor, and then took an opposite one for himself.

"Take off your hat, won't you?" he said in that half-authoritative, have-persuasive manner so peculiarly his own, and a manner which women never seemed to think of disobeying. She raised her hands and unfastened the large black velvet hat which shadowed her face and placed it on her lap silently. It was a very fair face, and one which repaid Terence O'Hara for his request; yet a sad face withal, because of that sorrowful droop of the sweet red lips, those

lines of care upon the broad white brow. Her hair, bright in hue but not warm enough for gold, was drawn off from the forehead and was twisted in a loose soft knot behind.

As a rule Terence O'Hara said what he pleased to women ; and they, even if they rebuked, forgave him. But with Lesley Rochford there was something which forbade such rashness and held many impetuous utterances in check, though she herself was unconscious of the fact. He watched her silently now, and was only aroused to the knowledge of his unusual abstraction by a remark of her own. He did not answer that remark because he did not hear it. "Did you ever hear of sealskin eyes?" he asked abruptly, and then the oddness of the question seemed to strike him as well as herself, and he laughed outright. "Excuse me," he said, when he had recovered breath, "but Nora, when she described you to me that day you called to look at the rooms, declared you had eyes like the 'velvety stuff the ladies' long jackets are made of.' And I was just thinking I had never heard a more accurate description."

A faint warm colour stole into the fair face. "It is certainly an original one," she said.

"Oh, Nora is quite an original," exclaimed Terence O'Hara. "Haven't you found that out yet?"

"She does not favour me with as much of her company as you seem to enjoy," smiled his companion.

"She is a good soul," he said carelessly. "And it's one of my peculiarities, Mrs. Rochford, to talk to everybody that comes in my way, and learn all about them that I can."

"What use do you make of the information?" she asked.

He shrugged his shoulders. "None at all, I am afraid. By the way, how is it I never meet you out anywhere. I mean at any of the *soirées* and meetings, and 'at homes' given by the artist set. You are famous enough, and one hears of your name everywhere, but—never sees you."

"I don't care for society," she answered indifferently. "I spend my days in painting—my evenings in reading and music. That is enough for me."

"You are very different to most women then."

"That may be. I have told you before that I lead a very quiet life."

Terence was silent for a moment ; she was leaning slightly forward in the low velvet chair, her cheek resting on her hand, her eyes hidden by the full white lids, that had so

weary a droop, and shadowed by the length of sweeping lashes, that were darker than the eyes themselves. The young man's thoughts were busy about her.

"Is she unhappy," he thought. "Did she love the dead man whose name she bears? Does she not care for fame? Does she always dream like this?"

For her thoughts seemed far away, and of his presence she was scarcely conscious. The room seemed more full of shadows now, and the only sound that filled it was the fierce continuous patter of the rain against the wide dim window, and on the stone pavement without. Heavily and more heavily it fell, and to the woman's heart came a strange fancy, a fancy that that sound was like the sound of falling tears, dropping wearily, heavily, continuously; dropping from sad eyes, wrung from aching hearts, hearts that throbbed with human life in the midst of a great city; hearts that beat together and yet apart in the dusky shadows of a silent room. Hearts where the echo of many steps sounded swift or slow, or near or far away; hearts that had hungered and fasted as the food they craved was just within their longing reach, saw it pass away to satisfy the wants of others. Hearts that——

"Sure, and it's the darkness meself can see, and not the likes o' ye two," broke in a voice at this juncture. "And where am I to put the tay at all, at all?"

The echoes died suddenly away, and the fancy also—to return when the storm of the elements should find their likeness in the storm of human passions, and the rain of heavy tears should fall no longer from the sky, but from the eyes that watched it now.

It was so pleasant sitting there in the lamplight, and sipping tea out of the little Japanese cups. So pleasant, chatting and laughing and talking in that disjointed desultory fashion that springs from well-assured confidence in the interest of each talker.

Lesley Rochford had spent a few such half-hours lately, but none of them so pleasant as this. As for her companion he was so accustomed to make the best of life, to take the utmost fill and measure of every enjoyment that came in his way, that it was little wonder if he did it now.

"I have not had my promised music yet," said Lesley Rochford at last. "I see the guitar there. Go and sing to me."

He rose at once and reached the instrument, and threw himself in his usual careless fashion into a seat. The woman's eyes which rested on the easy grace of the slight young figure held a new and dangerous softness in their depths. He touched a few chords lightly, tenderly, as one who loves what he touches, and all the depth and earnestness which his face usually lacked came into it now with the utterance and sound of music.

It was but a simple little song he sang, but the pathos and tenderness of his voice gave it infinite meaning. She leant back in the low velvet chair, and listened with quiet content. He went on from one song to another, the soft chords of the guitar just breathing out an accompaniment to the full rich tones of his voice, the voice that rose and fell in passionate cadence, and filled his listener's heart with strange and almost painful feelings.

As the last notes died off the strings, as the last sound sank into silence like a sigh, two great tears fell from the quiet listener's eyes, and rolled down her pale cheeks. She started. She had not known she was so deeply moved. He rose to his feet and laid aside the guitar; and then, quite suddenly, came and knelt before her, and looked up at her face.

"No thanks were ever so sweet," he murmured.

For he had seen the dimmed eyes, and he cared little for the silent lips. She brushed the tears away, and a hot wave of colour swept over the fair sweet face. "I was thinking——" she said, and then she paused and turned paler still.

She did not tell him of what she had thought. She scarcely knew herself. Her ungloved hands lay clasped upon her lap; small, slender white hands which he had often watched admiringly. He stooped, and let his lips rest on one of them.

She coloured softly and drew them away with a hurried uncertain movement unlike her usual calm repose.

"Forgive me," he said, almost humbly. He was afraid he had angered her, and the fear troubled him.

She made no answer; only looked with those deep soft eyes into the eager young face uplifted to her own.

A strange fear and yet a joy, sweet and subtle as a dream, stole into her heart, and quickened its fitful beats.

The room was intensely still. The rain had ceased now, and the sound of the plashing drops no longer echoed from

without. The calm serious regard with which she had hitherto met his glance was not in her power to give at this moment. She had passed through life untouched by love, unstirred by passion; but something in the gaze she met seemed to flash like lightning over her heart and soul, and reveal to her feelings she had never suspected, joy she had never known. The melodies she had heard, the words he had sung, had touched her deeply, had unstrung all her usual composure, and left her restless and disquieted. The white lids drooped, unable to bear that eager impassioned gaze, a half-sigh escaped her lips. She felt as if she were dreaming still, and cared neither to move nor speak. He rose and stood there, looking down at her, a hundred words thronging to his lips, yet unable to find utterance.

"I am nothing very great or very good," he said at last "Perhaps you will think me a presumptuous fool if I say what I long to say. I am no hand at fine speeches, nor would they tell you more than a few plain words. I have grown to care for you very dearly; more than I ever thought it was in me to care for any woman. I can hardly expect that you would think of me. You are so—different. But if—in time——"

The hesitating words, which had held for her the sweetest eloquence of any language she had ever heard, died away brokenly—abruptly. She gave him one quick glance; then her eyes fell again, and over her down-bent face came a warm burning flush. But she tried in vain to speak, only trembled greatly,

"You are angry—offended," he said hurriedly. "I should not have spoken so boldly."

"No," she sighed very softly. "I am not—angry."

"Then tell me if you care for me—ever so little—if you will let me—love—you."

It was such a new word to his lips that he could scarcely say it without an effort. A strong tide of feeling carried him away. He never meant to say so much until he had said it.

"Is it really a question of love," she asked, colouring faintly as she met his eyes. "You have not known me long, remember. You are very young. I am your senior in years and in sorrows—the sorrows that turn all the freshness and youth of life to the dreariness and regrets of age. You stand on the threshold of life—your future, your freedom, what have these to do with me?"

"Everything—for your sake alone I value them now."

Slowly she rose, and faced him in the gathering dusk, her face very pale, her heart beating heavily, almost audibly in the silence.

"Are you sure?" she asked, trembling. "Are you quite sure?"

"Sure that I love you? Sure that I need you? Sure that all my life will be brighter, happier, holier, for your sake? Indeed, yes!"

"If that be really so," she said very softly, "if I could make you happy——" She paused, and stretched out her hands with a gesture of infinite tenderness. "Do not deceive yourself or me," she entreated. "Through all my life I have not known what happiness could mean until—this moment."

The tears trembled on her lashes as she spoke; her lips parted with swift uneven breaths. All the colour had fled from her face now, but it was radiant with the glory of a great unselfish love. He took the small white hands, and drew them round his neck, while his arms closed round her and his lips rested on her own—unrebuked.

"I love you—I love you," he said again and again, and to her ears those words were the sweetest music that had ever reached them.

She listened and believed.

Life which for three years had been only a peaceful dream to Lesley Rochford now deepened into something richer, fuller, more perfect, and yet less full of content.

It ought not to have held that last feeling she knew, and often and often she blamed herself that it did, but she could not help it. It lay like a shadow on all the glory and sunshine of her love; it turned to a fever of unrest the sweet vague hopes which had thrilled her heart when first Terence O'Hara's lips had touched her own. At first he had prayed for a speedy marriage; but to this she would not listen.

"Wait till the summer is over," she had said, and, with much grumbling and discontent, he had agreed to do so.

Time went on. They both worked at their respective easels as assiduously as of yore. A new incentive now lay in each heart and mind; the incentive to excel in each other's eyes—the knowledge that now fame would hold a sweeter sound, and success a fuller meaning, when each was won.

Love had taught to Lesley Rochford what it teaches to all women ; it had given her beauty the depth and passion and tenderness it had needed, it lent to her eyes such fathomless joy, such dreaming ecstasy, as rarely light a human face.

At times she felt she was too blessed, too happy. This tranquil pause, this lotus-dream, seemed too sweet to last. Her whole soul had passed into the keeping of another. She knew it, and trembled for very fear of the joy she had gained in exchange.

Was the joy worth it ? On and on sped the golden hours. The spring had deepened into summer. Success again had smiled on both the artists. Their works had been warmly praised, and to both had brought the meed of such success.

"Why need we wait ?" urged the young lover, looking up at those calm deep eyes, in the summer dusk. "I have promised to go to Ireland next month. Let me take you with me. How proud I shall be of my—wife ! How gladly they will welcome you !"

They were standing side by side in his studio, looking out through the wide-open window at the summer beauty of earth and sky—the rosy liquid light, which fell on the great lime-trees, and white houses, the hot deserted street.

"London gets unbearable," he went on restlessly. "And we can well afford ourselves a holiday now. Come, my darling, say 'Yes.' We have no one's consent to ask. No one to please but ourselves. Make me happy at once."

"But can I make you happy ?" she asked softly. "It is just that I fear. You are so young ; you know little of women, so you have said ; but are you quite sure that I am *the* one ?"

"Of course I am. Why will you always doubt me. I daresay I seem a rattle-pated, harum-scarum sort of fellow often, and you are so calm, and sweet, and good—ten thousand times too good for me ; but all the same I love you ; and my love, unworthy as it is, will be yours for always. I cannot say more."

"I do not need more," she answered tremulously. "I do not know why I am afraid, and yet I am. It seems to me that there is something more for you to feel that I have given you—something more in you to be awakened than I have called to life—that some day you will find this out and repent."

"Repent! For heaven's sake, my darling, don't say such a thing. What a vacillating fool you must think me! You are my *beau idéal* of womanhood, of all that is true, and sweet, and perfect; there is but one shadow of regret in all my love for you, and that is——"

"What?" she asked anxiously, as he paused.

"That you ever belonged to another. That I, who love you so, am only second to——"

"Oh, hush, hush!" she interrupted passionately. "You know how your words pain me. Have I not told you the whole sad story. Was I indeed to blame?"

"No," he murmured, and drew her back into his arms, and bent his lips upon her own. "No, you were not to blame; but I am jealous of that dead man, I think."

"You need not be. You alone have taught me what it is to love."

"You say so, and yet you refuse my prayer."

"Because I so fear to take advantage of your youth, your passion, your impulsive nature. In the days to come, if you meet some girl—fair, pure, young, innocent—will you not compare her with me, will not some regret steal into your heart that you so rashly bartered away your freedom in your early youth. You know the proverb: 'A young man married is a man that's marred.'"

"How unselfish you are," he exclaimed, releasing her from his arms, and looking down at her from his tall height, with eyes that were very tender and very ardent now. "How little you think of yourself, and how little you appraise your own worth! What girl or woman can ever be to me what you are?"

Her head drooped. A warm flush stole to her face, and the dying rays of the sunlight shone like a halo around her head. Something in her purity and beauty, something nobler, far-reaching, beyond his own comprehension of her nature and her love, came to him at that moment, as he looked.

"You are the angel of my life," he said, and bent and kissed her hands with a reverence he had never felt before. "I wonder I ever dared asked you to share that life. Well, be it as you will. I await your decision."

"If indeed you love me, if indeed I could be of use or service to you, if only I were sure you would never regret——"

The words fell from her lips half unconsciously. He grew restless and impatient as he heard.

"Always that," he said, and dropped her hands, and turned away. "You have no trust in me, no faith—I see it."

He had put the fear of her own heart into words, and she grew pale as she heard them. Then a passion of regret swept over her as she saw his clouded brow, his troubled face. Her great love made her very humble; to deal him the smallest pain was to give herself a double measure.

"Indeed, I have faith in you," she said earnestly. "Love should be blind I know, but I am afraid to close my eyes on an unquestioned happiness. It is of you I think, surely you do not doubt that. If one day you found you had made a mistake, that your love for me was not enough to fill your life, that——"

"Do you think I could ever be false to you?" he asked, and the tenderness in his voice thrilled to her heart as she heard.

"Not intentionally, I know," she murmured, her face paling, her eyes lifted to his own with such unconscious adoration in their depths as moved him deeply.

"How well she loves me," he thought. "How well!"

His pulse beat high, his face grew warm. A sense of power and triumph stole over him.

"Oh, my own, do not doubt, do not doubt," he murmured passionately. "Come to me, and give me happiness as you have given me love."

She listened; and her doubts faded, and all her strength grew weak before that fond persuasion. As the soft wind ruffled the hair above her brow, as one by one the stars came out in the dim blue sky, and the pale moon-rays fell on the face she loved, and lit up the eyes that only sought her own, she laid her head upon his breast, and from that resting-place gave him the answer that he prayed.

"Ere the summer is gone—that will be one month more," he whispered.

"In one month more," she said, and her eyes fell; the sigh that parted her lips was breathless with a happiness she scarce could hold within that trembling tender woman's heart that beat against his own.

CHAPTER III.

What are we waiting for, oh my heart ?
 Kiss me straight on the brows—and part.
 Again—Again !

* * * * *
 Good-bye for ever ! Good-bye, good-bye !

"A LADY to see ye, ma'am," said Nora Dillon, opening the door of Lesley Rochford's studio. "Her name—she won't be aafter givin' me that. Her biziniss is with yerself, sure. Is it showin' her up I'll be?"

"Yes, if she really wishes to see me," said Lesley wonderingly.

She was standing before her easel, her hands clasped behind her, her eyes on the little square of canvas, which gave her back the face of her lover. It lived so constantly in her memory, it was no wonder that it was reproduced as a labour of love. Her doubts and fears were all at rest now. She had banished them since that whispered promise in the summer moonlight had been given, for with it her life, and soul, and heart, and thoughts had passed into his keeping, and made him master of her fate.

He loved her—she loved him. That was enough now.

"Pardon me, madam," said a sweet low voice, interrupting her thoughts. "I have taken a great liberty in calling, I know; your well-known kindness must plead my excuse."

Lesley Rochford turned to the door with a start. A girl stood there; a girl—a vision rather. It seemed as if so lovely and perfect a face was scarcely possible to flesh and blood. The girl was poorly and shabbily dressed, but the face that met Lesley Rochford's admiring eyes shone out in its brilliance and beauty with all the greater charm.

"Pray come in. What can I do for you?" she said, drawing a chair forward for her visitor.

"May I tell you my story?" asked the liquid foreign voice. "I came over to England with my father and mother six months ago. My father was a Spanish merchant, and my mother an Englishwoman. I have lived all my life in Lisbon till these last six months. Soon after our arrival in this country my father was taken ill and died. My

mother and myself are almost penniless, and quite friendless. I have tried every way and every means of procuring employment, and failed. At last one day I saw a drawing of yours—a head—in a shop, where I had taken some of my poor little sketches. I asked your name and address. The people told me how kind you were, and I have come to you as a last resource, to ask you if you are in need of a model. At all the places where I took my sketches, they said, 'Why don't you offer yourself as a model.' Alas! madam, it was a hard struggle with pride before I could bring myself to do so. But you are of my own sex. You might know other lady-painters. I took courage to come and ask you. Even if you do not want a model you might know of someone else—and—for my mother's sake——"

The beautiful voice broke; the rapid impulsive words died away. Lesley Rochford had listened with deep compassion. Even if she had not been moved by such impulse she could scarcely have resisted the lovely face that aroused all the artistic longings of her nature.

"I shall be only too delighted if you will give me some sittings," she said kindly. "Believe me, I feel deeply for your sorrow and distress. I will do my best to procure you some employment, although I have not many friends or much influence. The life of a model is not one suited to a girl so young, and—pardon my frankness—so beautiful as yourself. Still you are safe enough here. Now let us arrange terms."

That was speedily done, for Lesley Rochford was only too ready to err on the side of generosity; the hours of sitting were settled, and the girl agreed to begin her new duties the next day.

Lesley Rochford told the story to her lover that evening, as they went home together from the studio, making light of her own share in it, and accepting with amusing merriment his laughing banter on her philanthropy.

"You can send her to me when you have done," he said in conclusion. "We shall be married by that time, so you won't be afraid to trust me."

"I am not afraid now," she answered, smiling proudly up at the handsome bright young face that towered above her in the summer dusk.

"I am glad to hear that," he said, with sudden gravity.

It had been an arranged thing between the lovers that

they should in no way interfere with each other's pursuits during the day. The studio doors were kept religiously shut, and working hours were strictly respected. The morning following her interview with the lovely young Spaniard, Lesley Rochford was at her easel in unusually good time. She had not felt so much interest and eagerness for many a long day as she now felt to put that exquisite face on her canvas.

"Sit there," she told the girl, when the first few preliminaries had been arranged. She then proceeded to throw some rich lace drapery over the head, and turning the lovely profile in the position she required, commenced her work. It was a face hard to describe, this face of Rosalia Alvarez. Soft masses of dark brown hair shaded her brow; the features were as perfect as if cut by a chisel; the full white lids and long sweeping lashes shaded eyes that might well haunt a poet's dreams; the curved red lips, the beautifully turned chin, the exquisite pose of the head on the slender neck—all made up a picture of female loveliness rarely to be met with, and of which the girl herself seemed quite unconscious. As she sat there so patiently and so still, Lesley Rochford drew her on to tell more of herself and her troubles, and her heart was stirred to even deeper pity as she listened. She was so happy herself; life seemed so full of joy and promise, that it was only natural her sweet compassion should be easily granted to anyone less blessed and prosperous. The hours of the first sitting passed; a second and a third followed. On the morning of the fourth day, however, as Lesley Rochford rose, she was conscious of a burning, throbbing pain in her temples, and a sensation, altogether new to her, of weakness and dizziness. She lay down on the bed again, marvelling a little what could be the matter, and consoling herself with the thought that it was nothing but a bad headache, which would soon pass off. Feeling too ill and stupefied even to ring for assistance, she lay there until she fell into a heavy doze, from which she was at length aroused by the striking of a clock in her room. Drowsily she counted the strokes—ten—eleven—twelve, then with a start remembered she should have been at her studio two hours before, and again essayed to rise and dress herself. In vain. She was really ill, and the terrified face of the servant confirmed her fears, as she at last appeared at the bedroom door.

Two hours later Lesley Rochford was in a burning fever, and unconscious of anything or anyone around her.

Meanwhile, at the studio, the young model waited in vain for the appearance of her employer. At last she rang the bell, and enquired of Nora Dillon whether she knew what was detaining Mrs. Rochford.

The good woman being quite ignorant in the matter, went in her turn to Terence O'Hara, and he alarmed at the news of this unexplained absence, came at once to the room where the young Spaniard was sitting. The girl was leaning back in her chair, her beautiful eyes upraised in dreamy languor; her face, with its exquisite colouring and perfect contour, framed in by that cloud of lace which Lesley had taught her to arrange. As Terence came in through the open doorway he stopped abruptly, and gazed with irrepressible amazement at the lovely face which met his eyes. Hearing his step, the girl turned abruptly, and a shy soft blush warmed her cheek as she met the young man's look of undisguised admiration.

Recovering himself quickly, Terence O'Hara proceeded to question her as to whether Mrs. Rochford had said nothing the previous day about absenting herself. Being answered in the negative, he suggested to Nora that she should go round to Lesley's lodgings and enquire whether anything had detained her. This suggestion being carried out willingly enough by the good-natured Irishwoman, he next proceeded to enliven the tedium of waiting by entering into conversation with the lovely model.

The shyness and timidity of the girl amused him. She was evidently so afraid of talking, and yet so willing to be talked to.

Half an hour—an hour, drifted by, then Nora came back with a grave face and anxious brow, and pronounced Lesley to be ill of a bad fever, and stating she had been denied admission to her on account of that same fever's "infectiousness."

Terence O'Hara was visibly distressed as he heard the news; but, to the astonishment of Nora and himself, the girl rose quickly from her seat, unfastened the scarf of lace from about her head, and, putting on her bonnet, demanded to know Mrs. Rochford's address.

"I shall go and nurse her," she said calmly. "You say she is in lodgings alone. I will take care of her. I am a

capital nurse, and she—she was so good to me. I can never forget her — never — the only friend I found in England in my great need ! ”

“ I will come with you and show you the way,” said Terence O’Hara eagerly. “ I also am anxious about her.”

“ She is a friend of yours ? ” asked the girl.

The lovely Spanish eyes met his own. He felt bewildered — intoxicated as he gazed into their wonderful depths.

“ Yes,” he said hurriedly, “ a friend of mine.”

For the life of him he could not say : “ In three weeks she was to have been my wife.”

The fever took its course, and the young Spaniard fulfilled her word nobly. Night and day she tended the sick woman, and Terence O’Hara, to recompense her devotion, brought her own mother from their miserable lodgings and installed her in a spare room in the house where Lesley lived.

He came daily once or twice to enquire after his friend — he had never told the truth yet to Rosalia Alvarez — and each day the telling seemed more difficult. Meeting those liquid eyes, holding those hurried dialogues as she came from the sick-room to him, feeling the touch of those warm soft fingers as in greeting or adieu they met his own — what was there in all this ? “ Nothing, of course,” he told himself with superb scorn, with a consciousness of his own strength which never failed him till in her presence ; then he grew weak — weak as a child. The mere sound of her voice, the faintest rustle of her dress sent a thrill as of fire through his veins, and made his pulses leap and throb as never had they done for Lesley Rochford. Had she been right when she said “ there was something for him to give that he had not given — something for him to learn that she had never taught.” He remembered the words now, and cursed himself for a traitor ; and yet his heart ached within his breast for the mere delight of that girl’s maddening presence.

Lesley Rochford had judged him rightly. There had been something more for him to feel, and now, too late, he felt it. The days were hot and sultry. He still went to his studio, but he no longer worked. The brightness and youth had passed out of his face ; it had grown worn and haggard, and the frank blue eyes were clouded and full of pain. A feverish restlessness was upon him, and also a feeling of shame and of despair, and the throbbing

summer hours were bitter and weary, and the nights were heavy with endless thought. The struggle with himself—that terrible struggle between honour and passion, love and duty—had commenced in his life as it commences in so many a human life. The present was intoxicating, the past was burdened with regrets, of the future he dared not think. So time went on, and the struggle went on, and the truth remained untold.

One night, as he came to hear the news of the woman who should that very day have been his wife, the girl came towards him from the sick-chamber, her eyes radiant, her face colourless with long hours of watching and of anxiety. The room where he stood was divided from that where Lesley lay by folding-doors. In her eagerness and haste the girl had left them ajar.

"Good news! Such good news," she said breathlessly. "The crisis is safely over now. She will live, thank God, she will live!"

And even as she said the words a sudden dimness and dizziness came before her eyes. She turned white as death; and with a sudden staggering step into the blackness and darkness, which seemed to fall around her like a cloak, stretched out her hands, and fell senseless into his arms.

For a moment a terrible icy fear seemed to crush him, his pulses stood still, then bounded into quicker life, and beat like hammers in his brain and heart.

"Was she to fall ill too? Had she overtaxed her strength, and now——"

The thought was agony. He held the senseless form in his arms, and wild words broke from his lips, words which would never have been uttered had he known who heard them. The faintness passed. A sigh parted the girl's pale lips, her eyes unclosed, and looked up to his face; and, as he met their gaze, he forgot time, place, honour, truth, all things that he should have remembered, all that she too should have known, for the shy blush, the look that answered his, spoke out a meaning to which he could not be blind; and, as flame leaps at the touch of a torch, so his heart gave back the wildness and sweetness of her own unconscious love, and she knew his secret even as she had betrayed her own.

To that passionate southern heart the revelation brought no fear, no shame, only a rich, full, intoxicating delight. She

had not fully known what he was to her. Now—— She moved restlessly in his arms, and he assisted her to the chair by the open window, and the cool night air soon revived her. He stood by her side quite silent; he felt that he was a traitor to both these women who loved him, and the agony and humiliation of that moment gave him the keenest suffering his life had ever known.

Should he tell her the truth, even now? He looked at her face, and strength failed him. "I will go home and write it," he said to himself, and, with a few broken words of farewell, he abruptly left the room.

She sat there lost in a happy dream. How fair, how sweet was life! How beautiful this land which she had thought so cold and barren! A faint voice from the inner room called her back to her duties. She started, and then hurried to the bedside of her patient.

Lesley Rochford lay back on her pillows, white as a broken lily. Her eyes took in all the radiance and loveliness of the girl beside her with a calm serious intentness that awed and startled her.

"Child," she murmured faintly, "I owe you a vast debt. You have been a devoted nurse. I heard them say I owe my life to you. I think you are good and true even as you are fair. I hope your life will be a happy one, a happier one than mine. Tell me, who were you speaking to in the other room a few moments since?"

"Mr. O'Hara, madam."

The shy blush, the downcast eyes, the soft pretty tremor which shook the lovely young figure, all told their own tale. Lesley remembered the wild words she had heard, and shuddered and grew sick at heart.

"Can I do it!" she cried, in the bitterness and anguish of her great sorrow. "Oh, God! give me strength, give me strength!"

"You are weary and weak, dear lady. You ought not to talk," said the girl softly, as she knelt by the bed, and gently touched one of the slender wasted hands.

"Tell me what day of the month this is?" Lesley asked faintly.

"The twenty-eighth of July."

A strange wan smile stole to the pale lips. "The day that should have seen me his wife," she said to herself bitterly. "The day that has proved his faithlessness."

"Will you not try and sleep, dear lady," murmured the sweet low voice by her side, the voice whose every echo thrilled her listener's heart with pain. "It will do you so much good, the doctor said so."

"Sleep!" answered Lesley wearily. "No, not now—not now. I have been so long—asleep."

"God give me strength to be strong." That had been Lesley Rochford's prayer from day to day. It was her prayer when she saw the beautiful girl beside her, drooping, pining, sorrow-stricken as herself, for the truth had come to her at last, and Terence O'Hara had told it. It was her prayer when she heard her lover's voice, making those formal enquiries in the visits that each day grew briefer and more brief. It was her prayer now, as, for the first time, she left her sick-room, and lay on the couch by the open window, in the autumn twilight, awaiting his visit. "God give me strength to be strong."

How many an aching human heart has echoed that prayer, and will so echo it till life shall be no more!

He came at last; and, despite the shadows of the dusk, she saw how terribly, sadly changed he was. The sight smote her with the keenness of an uttered reproach. She had thought to give him love, peace, content; she had been powerless to deal him anything but sorrow and regret.

"Sit there," she said gently, after he had greeted her, his lips only resting on her hand. She noted that with a pang so sharp that she feared again her task might be beyond her strength. "Sit there, and listen to me a few moments. I cannot speak much, for I am still weak; but I have had something on my mind to say to you for long. It has grown stronger and stronger within me as I have been lying there day after day, and I cannot put it off any longer. Terence, would you be very sorry if I said I could not marry you?"

The start he gave, the flush that sprang to his brow, the sudden rapture of relief that lit his eyes—dusk and twilight shadows could not hide such signs as these from the eyes of a woman who loved him as she loved?

"What do you mean?" he stammered huskily. "Have I offended you? In what have I erred?"

"In nothing," she said; and her smile was so serene, her voice so calm, that how could he suspect the bitter

aching of the poor tried heart, the anguish of the brave and faithful spirit? "In nothing, my darling; only I feel more unsuited to you than ever. My health will never be strong, and what would you do with an ailing wife—you, who have to work so hard as it is? If I could bring you nothing else, I at least thought I should have strength to help, and hands to work for you. Besides, I always said I was too old for you, Terence, and I feel older than ever now."

"I cannot understand you," he said huskily. "This resolve is so sudden, so unexpected. You told me you loved me; why, we should have been married now but for this illness. Something must have changed you; you are not a fickle woman. That I was never worth your love. I know; but have you changed, repented? What is it that has come between us?"

"A shadow, I think," she said very gently; "that is all. Think me unworthy, fickle; think even that I do—not—love you. But believe this, that never can I be your wife, and forgive me my broken promise!"

His face grew very pale; his eyes looked at her troubled and perplexed.

"I cannot understand you," he said.

"There is no need to try. You have only to forget the romance we wove this summer that has passed, and to say to me, 'Good-bye.'"

"But you are not going away; you will not leave England; we may surely be friends?"

"Friends! Oh yes," she said; and her pale lips smiled, and, the brave, deep, steadfast eyes looked up unflinchingly at the face they loved so dearly, oh, so dearly. "In time we shall be friends—the best of friends—when I have come back from Rome, and you have forgotten my—fickleness."

Did he quite believe? Did she quite deceive him? She never knew. In after years she heard of him as happy, rich, famous; but the snows of sorrow, not of age, were on her own head then, and in her heart the chastened memory of a life's one love.

There was no mockery of the friendship he had offered between them. That "Good-bye" was for ever!

"Child Lillian."

A TALE OF CHRISTMAS CHARITY.

CHAPTER I.

"I THINK it looks very well," said Miss Summers, moving back a few steps and surveying her labours, the result of days of finger pricking from many holly sprays and evergreens.

The dusk was creeping on apace ; the pretty little church was dimly lit for the benefit of the few remaining workers. An ancient woman, who had held the office of pew-opener ever since the church had been opened, was moving about collecting scattered boughs and sweeping up the litter consequent on Christmas decorations. The vergers were removing ladders and bustling actively about. A group of girls, of ages ranging from sixteen to forty-five (Miss Summers herself owned to thirty) were admiring the result of their respective handiwork.

It was a beautiful old church, this church of Wyndhurst, set as it was on the outskirts of the little town whose name it bore—a primitive, quaint, old country town, on the borders of vast forest lands, where the red deer still could roam undisturbed, and the wary fox hide in impenetrable coverts.

Recently a new Vicar had been appointed ; a friend, so it was said, of Lord Longton's, one of the largest landed proprietors in the neighbourhood.

Lord Longton was an elderly man, of severe and rigorous principles ; a martinet in all matters of duty and propriety. His second son, a somewhat wild, but brilliantly-gifted youth, had been at college with Gabriel Drew, and the two became fast friends and associates. Gabriel had only been ordained four years when, through Lord Maurice's influence, he obtained the living of Wyndhurst. It would have puzzled him greatly had he known the almost morbid desire his friend had evinced to procure this living for him—had he witnessed the passionate en-

treaties and untiring zeal with which Lord Maurice beset his father, of whom at all other times he was somewhat in awe. Yet when he had got his way and seen Gabriel Drew established comfortably in the Vicarage, he had not availed himself, as might have been expected, of the now easily-obtainable privilege of his friend's constant society, but, to Gabriel Drew's surprise, had suddenly started off on one of those travelling expeditions which were the outcome of a restless and romantic temperament.

The duties of the Vicar were few; the life somewhat monotonous; the society dull, and consequential, and somewhat narrow-minded. The Vicarage itself was a small old-fashioned house on the outskirts of the town, shut in by trees and high hedges of laurel. From the road the house was invisible, but the gate opened on a broad gravelled-walk, which led in turn to a trim and well-kept lawn, on which the study and drawing-room windows opened. A wealth of ivy and creepers covered the walls, and wreathed the porch and gables. In the summer it looked deliciously cool and picturesque; but at this season of the year, it wore a gloomy and damp aspect, and was more suggestive of rheumatism than of comfort.

Yet all through the late summer, and the wet and dreary autumn, had Gabriel Drew lived there uncomplainingly, his only attendant an old woman, who cooked, and looked after his household needs. It had been a dull and dreary life, with little to commend it to a man young and apparently full of energy and fervour, and possessed of an amount of nervous vitality that seemed to need some larger outlet whereon to expend its powers.

In the dusk of this Christmas Eve, Gabriel Drew was sitting by his study fire, apparently in deep thought; not a pleasant vein of thought either, to judge from the knitted brow and darkly-troubled eyes that looked so out of place in the young face. He ought to have been at the church. The spinsters, young and ancient, who had pricked their fingers with holly wreaths and endured physical discomfort to any extent in their laudable efforts at "decorating" the beautiful old church, were all anxiously expecting his arrival and praise for their exertions. But his thoughts were far away from them, and no remembrance of the tardily-given promise that he would "look in during the evening," visited his memory now.

There was no light in the room, save from the blazing logs, and no sound to disturb the stillness, save the tick of the clock, or the fall of the wood-ash on the hearth. Twice the hour chimed without his noticing the passage of time ; the logs began to burn dully, and the darkness to fall more dense and deep about the shadowy room and the quiet figure.

Far away in the past, amidst bitter and sorrowful memories of other years, were the young Vicar's thoughts—so far away that he started as if aroused from a long sleep when, at last, for the third time, the clock struck the hour. He rose to his feet then in a dazed and dreamy way, and stirred the fire into a momentary blaze which showed him the face of the timepiece. It was nine o'clock. Mechanically he rang the bell, and it was answered by his old servant bringing in lights and tea. He drank a cup, keeping his back to the lamp meantime, as if its rays hurt his eyes, and then went out into the little dark hall, and, throwing his cloak over his arm, he left the Vicarage and took his way to the church. Late as it was he did not hurry. He hoped the crowd of busy workers would have left ; he felt strangely disinclined for idle chatter and conventional talk to-night.

How still it was under the quiet stars and along the quiet road ; how still and calm and unemotional in comparison with the human lives that fretted, and ached, and suffered, even in the little world of this small country town ! And, of all the hearts that beat there, weighted each with its own burden of sorrow, and misery, and regret, perhaps few were so heavily weighted, or ached with so bitter a pain as that of the man whose dark eyes turned heavenwards now with nothing but despair in their depths.

"I to be Heaven's minister !" he cried in bitterness of self communing, "I to preach hope, and comfort, and joy !" and he laughed as in scorn of himself and the faith that never yet had eased his own pain, or lightened his own burden.

When he reached the church it was all in darkness. The fair workers had grown tired of waiting, and had gone to their respective homes. He let himself into the vestry by his own key, and lit the lamp there, and, taking it in his hand, entered the church by the door of communication.

It was quite dark, and the faint rays of the lamp showed

him here and there a point of scarlet from a cross of holly, or the white gleam of delicate exotics, sent by neighbouring rank and wealth for Christmas decoration. He stood a moment and looked around, then mounted the steps to the altar and placed his lamp there before a magnificent cross of azaleas.

Having done this, he retraced his steps and groped his way through the dusk to the pulpit. Ascending it, he paused and looked down into the far-stretching darkness of the aisle, where the familiar rows of faces were wont to look back to his own, while he preached with that eloquence and fervour which gave all his sermons so great a charm.

The silence without seemed intensified here. The faint scents of the flowers stole like a subtle incense through the darkness. The little bead of flame from the lamp flickered dully in the gloom and threw strange shadows on the painted reredos; and, as if overpowered by weight of thought and feeling, the young clergyman sank on his knees and buried his face on his folded arms. So earnest were his prayers, so fervent was the flood of feeling let loose from the tortured heart, that no external sound or sight seemed capable of disturbing that intense self-consciousness. The conflict lasted long into the waning night, only to end, as many another had done, in mental and physical prostration.

It was no new thing for Gabriel Drew to torture himself with doubts as to his own fitness for his office. The dreams and desires after the lost innocence and purity of spirit which are ever sullied and dragged earthwards by the desires and weakness of the flesh; the fear that he did too little, and craved too much; the conflicts between science and simplicity, faith and doctrine, necessity and desire; all these were living agonies to him. His morbid consciousness of useless labours, and lukewarm zeal, only too often left him in this distressing state of weakness and helplessness.

At last he raised his head and looked about. His face was white, and great drops stood on his pale brow. The flame of the lamp burned dimly in the distance, and the chill of coming dawn seemed to fill the atmosphere he breathed. He felt faint and spent as he took his way down the pulpit steps by mere instinct. The church seemed full of spectral shadows, and strange faces peered

from out the gloom. At the bottom of the pulpit steps he staggered from sheer weakness, and involuntarily stretched out his hand to save himself from falling. As he did so his foot struck against some obstacle, and, on looking more closely, he saw that it was a large basket containing flowers. Stooping to push it aside he was surprised at its weight, and fetched the lamp over to inspect it more nearly. He removed the loose boughs and flowers laid on the top, and beneath them, with its dusky head pillowed on a shawl, and face flushed and rosy with sleep, lay a little child.

The young clergyman was so startled and confounded by the unexpected sight that he nearly dropped the lamp. Recovering himself by an effort he bent more closely over the tiny sleeper, seeking for some clue to the mystery of its appearance here. There was a scrap of paper pinned to the shawl, which he eagerly seized and read. It contained but two words:

"Child Lilian."

A strange nervous horror sprang into his eyes as he read that name. He sat down on the pulpit steps and surveyed this mysterious intruder with inward perturbation. How could it have come here? Had any of the working party left it? He ran over the names in his memory, and dismissed the surmise as ridiculous. Besides—and he started as he thought of this—when he had ascended the pulpit no basket had been there; of that he felt certain. It was too large to have escaped his notice. Could anyone have come in while he had been passing through that ordeal of self-examination and agonised prayer? The key was in the vestry door; he had left it there. It would have been easy for anyone to enter.

The more he thought of it, the more puzzled he grew. Meanwhile, there was the child in its floral bed, and what was to be done with it? It was past midnight now. He could not leave it here, and he knew no one to whom he could take it at such an hour with a request for admission. As if to disturb him still more, the child suddenly awoke, and fixed two dark and solemn eyes upon his face. It did not attempt to move, only lay there and looked at him, and he looked back at it, in maddening perplexity and almost terror lest it should stir or cry.

Suddenly it smiled, and held out its arms in mute re-

quest to be taken up. Gabriel Drew was so startled by the invitation that involuntarily he rose, and bent over the extemporised cradle. An instant, and he had drawn the little creature out of its nest and was surveying it by the light of the lamp.

As far as he could judge, it was between two and three years of age ; a lovely little creature, with soft, dusky curls and solemn eyes, which looked black as night beneath their long, curved lashes. His own deepened with bewildering admiration as he set the child down on the stone floor, and said, almost roughly :

"Who brought you here ?"

She looked up ; not afraid even amidst the darkness and strangeness of her surroundings, and then glanced from side to side, till finally her eyes rested on the basket and the scattered flowers. She suddenly stooped and gathered them up, taking no notice of her questioner. He touched her arm.

"Can't you speak, child ?" he said in gentler tones. "What is your name—how did you come here ?"

She clasped the flowers she had gathered in her arms closer to her little chest, and looked up at him with something elfish and inexplicable in her strange eyes. Then she nodded her small, dusky head, and said quite distinctly :

"Me don't know."

For a few moments the young clergyman stood there, surveying her in almost comical bewilderment, she gravely returning his survey. At last he said boldly :

"Will you come home with me ?"

She dropped her eyes then and glanced around at the gloomy aisle and the shadowy chancel ; then gave another little quick nod, and answered unhesitatingly :

"Yes."

Gabriel Drew asked no more questions. Mechanically he pushed the basket aside and took the lamp in his own hand, extending the other to his small companion. He carried her into the vestry and placed her on a chair, and then went back and fetched the basket and proceeded to search its contents. There was no clue there to the mystery of the child's appearance—nothing but a small bundle of clothes, which had formed her pillow, and the shawl in which she had been wrapped. He took the

bundle in his hand, and wrapping the shawl round the tiny figure he extinguished the lamp, and with the child in his arms went out into the gray, misty dawn of the Christmas day.

When he reached his home and let himself in, he found that the old servant had retired to rest. There was a light in the study, and the fire still burnt dimly on the old-fashioned open hearth. He threw on some wood and turned up the lamp, after having placed his small charge in his own easy-chair. It was a large roomy chair, and cushioned with soft seat and arms. The little creature nestled herself into it with the greatest composure, and looked gravely at all his proceedings without a sign of fear or curiosity.

When the fire burned up he placed a small kettle on it, and as soon as it boiled he made some tea, all the necessary materials being at hand in a cupboard by the fireplace. Having done this he poured out a little, and brought it to the child. She drank it eagerly, and gave him back the cup with a polite, "Tank you," which rather surprised him.

"Are you sleepy?" he asked, as he settled the cushions more comfortably in her extemporised bed.

She shook her head, and perched herself bolt upright like a small sprite, watching him with wide bright eyes, until he grew almost afraid of her silent and intense scrutiny.

He drew another chair up to the fire, and sat down. He felt he could not go to bed and leave his strange visitor by herself. Having built up the fire and made her as comfortable as possible, he took a book and set himself to read it, until daylight and his old Abigail should come to his assistance. But gradually the exhaustion of feeling and the sense of bodily fatigue stole the energy from his brain and numbed it into drowsy stupor. The book slipped from his hand; his eyes closed; his breathing grew slower and deeper; thought lapsed into insensibility; an intense calm wrapped his senses and quieted their long disturbance.

The fire died out, the lamp flickered feebly into dulness and darkness. A faint flush of red began to colour the outer sky and gleam through the curtained windows.

The child slumbered quietly amidst the soft cushions;

the room was hushed and still. Suddenly a cry rang out, piercing the silence with startling distinctness. It came from the lips of Gabriel Drew.

"Lilian!" he cried; "Lilian!"

As the call unsealed his slumbering senses he started, and awoke.

Bewildered he glanced from side to side, marvelling whether he had dreamt or was dreaming still of a face and voice too deeply loved—too bitterly hated for his own peace.

As he so looked and wondered, he heard the sound of chiming bells; he saw the reddened light of the Christmas morn stealing through the windows, and presently the golden sunbeams were dancing to and fro over a little dusky head that raised itself from the old arm-chair and faced him there with the memory of a life's unending regret.

CHAPTER II.

A LITTLE group were assembled at the church porch discussing the Vicar's sermon and the extraordinary announcement with which it had closed.

"Did you ever hear of such a thing!" exclaimed Miss Summers to each new comer who joined the group.

"Who could have done it?" passed from mouth to mouth, and heads nodded and significant looks were interchanged between the fair worshippers, which savoured not so much of the "Christian charity that thinketh no evil" as might have been expected from such devout and zealous members of the church.

"It is most mysterious," said the doctor's wife, who was a person of consequence and did a great deal of work in the parish, and knew all the "distressing" cases by heart. "Most mysterious. I feel confident none of my poor people had anything to do with it."

Mrs. Hope always said "*my* poor people," as if they were her own personal property.

"There was no basket at the foot of the pulpit stairs when I left," said Miss Summers. "For I went up into it myself to arrange the wreaths around the candlesticks."

"And Smithson shut the door, I know," added Miss Frost, another worker. "So no one could have got in after we left."

"If Mr. Drew had kept his promise and had come at the hour named," said Miss Summers loftily, "there would have been no such scandalous proceeding. I must say," she added, lowering her voice, "I never thought much of him; pitchforked among us through the interest of that stupid boy."

"Hush," cried Mrs. Hope, the doctor's wife, "here he comes."

Dead silence fell on the group. All eyes turned with one accord to the tall and sombre figure approaching.

The young clergyman raised his hat as he neared them. His face was very pale; his dark, melancholy eyes had a restless fire in their depths quite unusual to them. The mouth, so expressive of nervous sensibility and self-restraint, smiled faintly as the cold and critical faces turned towards him.

"Well, ladies," he said, "I owe you my best thanks for your exertions, as well as the usual compliment of good wishes. Can any of you help me to discover the perpetrator of the singular joke I spoke of from the pulpit?"

"Joke!" exclaimed Miss Summers severely. "I do not call it a joke, Mr. Drew. It is a very serious matter."

"Very," he acquiesced. "If no one claims the child, what is to become of it?"

"The workhouse," suggested Mrs. Hope.

He turned sharply on her.

"A rough start in life for a woman," he said. "The bread of charity is bitter eating."

"A woman?" faltered Miss Summers. "Is the child a girl then?"

"Yes," he said calmly; "did I not tell you so before?"

"And how old should you think she was?" demanded Mrs. Hope.

"Two or three years," he answered, knitting his brows. "She can speak; but gives no intelligible information."

Again the ladies exchanged looks.

"Perhaps," suggested Miss Flint, an ancient and sour-faced maiden of some forty summers, "it was intended as a Christmas present for you, Mr. Drew."

The young clergyman flushed scarlet. His dark eyes gave an ominous flash.

"Thanks," he said, "for the suggestion. I am only

sorry the donor of so precious a gift has thought fit to present it anonymously."

"Someone has taken advantage of your well-known kind-heartedness," interposed the doctor's wife. "I have often told you of the danger of indiscriminate charity. I never attempt to relieve a case unless I have first enquired into it thoroughly."

"Your method, my dear madam, is admirable," said the young clergyman ironically; "but there are times when 'delay is dangerous.' I prefer giving relief when it is needful, to postponing it until the case is proved to be deserving."

"It is a mistake," said the doctor's wife pompously, "a great mistake. And you spoil your poor, Mr. Drew, you really do. However, the main question is, what are you going to do about this child? Have you given information to the police?"

"No. What good will that do?"

"Perhaps," interpolated Miss Flint sweetly, "our kind Vicar does not care to be relieved of his charge; he may have intentions of adopting her himself."

The young clergyman looked gravely at his persecutor.

"Thank you for another suggestion," he said; "I see I can expect no help from any of you. I must try and solve this mystery myself."

He lifted his hat again, and turned abruptly away. The ladies exchanged glances.

"Mystery!" exclaimed Miss Flint, turning up her nose in lofty scorn.

"Depend upon it, he knows more than he pretends," echoed Miss Summers.

"Well!" ejaculated Mrs. Hope, "all I have to say is that if he does adopt a stray brat, left as a scandal and disgrace in our beautiful old church, it will be a most shameful and reprehensible proceeding. I won't countenance it!"

So the group dispersed in various states of indignation, and wonder, and perplexity, and the chief subject of conversation at their respective festive boards that day was the mysterious child, whose advent had such a sensational flavour about it.

Meanwhile, Gabriel Drew went homewards with troubled and conflicting feelings. The chance words of Miss Flint

had fired a new train of thought. "Adopt her!" He thought of his lonely, monotonous life—a life without object, an existence of torturing memories, that well-nigh maddened him at times. He thought of errors in the past—of the fatal shadow dogging him like an endless and un-availing remorse, and, as he thought of it, he seemed to see the soft light of a child's eyes, and the glad smile on a child's lips. His mind was still in conflict when he reached home.

It was a new and strange sensation to walk in to his usually lonely study, and see there on the rug before the fire the little waif and stray who had fallen across his path in so extraordinary a fashion.

She had a large book before her containing coloured pictures which the old serving-woman had given her as amusement. When Gabriel Drew entered she dropped the book and ran to meet him.

"Come here," she said in imperious baby fashion, and pulled him down to the rug. "Tell me who this?"

It was a large coloured plate of Ruth gleaning in the fields of Boaz to which she directed his attention. The face was very lovely, and full of wistful tenderness. The long dark hair flowed in wavy lines from the beautiful broad brow, and shrouded the slender white-robed figure like a garment.

Gabriel Drew looked at it, then at his little questioner. "That," he said, "is the picture of a good and faithful woman who lived many years ago. She is gathering the corn, you see, that has been left in the fields."

"What her name?" asked the child, looking sharply into his face.

"Her name," he said, "is Ruth."

The little sprite shook her head. A strange gleam came into her deep and wonderful eyes. "No," she said calmly, "not Rufe."

He started. "Do you know anyone like that—like the picture?" he asked eagerly.

The child was silent for a moment or two as if considering. Then she nodded her head in her quick childish fashion.

"Lil knows a lady like that. She came to see Mums."

"And who," asked Gabriel Drew, "is Mums?"

"Mums took care of Lil," said the little creature gravely. "Gone away now."

Then she laughed and flitted away into a corner of the room. "Lil stay with you," she said, dancing to and fro like a very sunbeam. "Never go back to Mums."

He looked down at the small atom, baffled and confused. Should he allow her to decide her own destiny or not? Should he accept her as some strange gift of Fate, shrouded in mystery, or thrust her forth on cold, scant charity?

While still he debated he felt the touch of the little soft hand; he looked down into the velvety depths of the dark eyes that had cast aside their elfin malice. The trust and the look conquered him. He bent forward half fearfully, and touched the baby-brow with cold and trembling lips. "Yes," he said, "you shall stay with me."

CHAPTER III.

HAVING thus decided the fate of his strange Christmas offering, Gabriel Drew set his mind to work to do the best for her.

With an utter disregard to scandal or unpopularity, he told enquiring members of his congregation that he intended to keep the child with him unless a lawful owner turned up. He procured an elderly woman to act as nurse and attendant, and set apart a room as nursery—a room which the child used as seldom as possible. She was his constant shadow, dancing after his footsteps, perching herself in odd nooks and corners to surprise him, taking all her meals at his table, and only kept from sharing his walks by a period of stormy and inclement weather.

At times she puzzled and bewildered him almost painfully. At others, she was so caressing, so winning, so entertaining, that he felt irresistibly drawn towards her. Yet, try as he might, he could gain no information respecting her previous life or relations; neither could he tell who was the "Mums" of whom she sometimes spoke. Now and then, at some elfin prank or look, a horrible suspicion darted into his brain, and he would seize her and gaze into those changeful, mocking eyes, with an eager and devouring anxiety, which held in it something of terror. But then she would throw her tiny arms about him, or nestle closely to his breast, and the fear would depart, and the strange attraction he felt for the little creature would reassert itself.

A month had passed, and it was not to be expected that scandal had yet exhausted itself respecting the Vicar's conduct. The story had flown everywhere, gaining additions and alterations that would have surprised Gabriel Drew not a little. There was an element about the story, however, that served to make him unpopular, and his own supreme indifference to hints and opinions did not mend matters.

One morning, to his surprise, he found a note from Lord Maurice, saying that he had just returned from Italy, and begging him to come over to Wyndhurst Park that night and dine with him.

"Come early, and we'll have a chat together," the note ended.

Nothing loth, Gabriel Drew accepted the invitation.

When he arrived he was shown into the library, where he found his friend alone. For a moment it struck Gabriel Drew that his greeting was somewhat forced, and lacked its old spontaneous heartiness.

After a moment or two Lord Maurice turned abruptly towards the fire, and leaning his arm on the mantelshelf as if to conceal his face, he said :

"By the way, Drew, what's this you've been doing? My father has taken it up rather severely. But I've persuaded him to let me talk the matter over alone with you. You know, dear old fellow, how hard I tried to get you this post. The last man held it thirty years, and here you've only been a few months and have contrived to set the whole parish by the ears. Whose child have you adopted? And, in the name of goodness, why?"

"I should like," said Gabriel Drew, with a humorous smile, "to be able to answer your first question as easily as you put it. As for the second—well—have you heard the story?"

"Two or three versions of it," answered the young man, stroking his fair moustache somewhat nervously, "what is yours? I confess I should like to hear the truth."

"The truth," said Gabriel Drew calmly, "is the one thing people find hard to believe. The story is simple enough. I went up to the church late on Christmas Eve after the workers had gone home; I found close to the pulpit steps a somewhat large-sized basket, filled, as I thought, with flowers and evergreens. I moved it aside,

thinking it had been forgotten. The weight struck me, and I lifted off some of the boughs and flowers, and found within a little child asleep. Naturally I was startled. I could not leave it in the cold church, neither did I know anyone to whom I could take it at that late hour. I therefore made a virtue of necessity, and carried it to the Vicarage. Next day I made enquiries, but could ascertain nothing. The child is still with me. That is all."

"All!" exclaimed Lord Maurice; "quite enough too, I should think. It's an odd business, I must say. And are you really going to keep the child?"

"What can I do with her?" said Gabriel Drew moodily. "I haven't the heart to send her to the workhouse. I have made all sorts of enquiries and set the police to work, but nothing has been heard yet."

"Not likely," said his friend gravely. "Whoever left her has no intention of being found out, depend upon it. But—excuse me, my dear fellow—are you not doing a very curious thing in keeping this little waif? My father says it is making you very unpopular among the lady members of your congregation. You see you are young and—and single—and altogether it does look odd."

"I suppose it does," said Gabriel Drew, "but as long as I am satisfied with the motives of my conduct, I don't care what a pack of foolish old women say."

"Pity they can't hear you," said Lord Maurice, smiling; "but they really are a dreadful backbiting lot. I told you so before you came."

"Oh!" he answered indifferently, "that I don't mind; it is a small thing after all. Their sphere is narrow. I cannot blame them if their views of life and mind correspond with it."

"And yet," said Lord Maurice thoughtfully, "it may be unpleasant for you if these stories get about. You must confess your conduct in the matter is singular. It is somewhat rare for unmarried men—especially young men, to saddle themselves with the responsibility of other people's children."

"Perhaps so," answered Gabriel Drew indifferently; "I never pretended to be like 'other men.'"

"Yet," hinted his friend somewhat diffidently, "don't you think your profession demands that you should consider other people's views and opinions? I hoped to see

you popular, and happy, and beloved here, as you have every right to be."

Gabriel Drew smiled bitterly.

"I am not popular," he said, "at least I fear so; yet I wish to do what is right and just to all. They say I have no class prejudices, but I think I have. Certainly I have little patience with narrow-minded views and grudging charity, such as I have found here."

His friend looked at him earnestly.

"Will you pardon me, if for a moment I revert to the old subject?" he said, lowering his voice "You are happier now, are you not? Time has surely made it easier."

Gabriel Drew's face grew suddenly stern and white.

"No," he said abruptly, "I am not happier. I staked my all on one throw, and—lost. It was only what I might have expected, but she led me on so skilfully!"

Lord Maurice turned aside his face, and his hand nervously tugged at his moustache.

"She would never have made you happy," he said, in low uneven tones. "Never. She would have blighted your whole career."

"Sometimes," said Gabriel Drew, "I think she has. All the spirit has gone out of my work. Often and often I feel I am unfit for the position I hold."

"Nonsense!" interrupted his friend, "that is morbid and hypercritical. You make a first-rate clergyman. Don't fancy things about 'unfitness,' and don't let a bad and treacherous woman's memory affect your whole life."

Gabriel Drew rose to his feet. He seemed powerfully agitated. He crossed his arms and leant against the carved oak mantelpiece, keeping his face away from the sympathetic gaze bent upon it.

"We will not speak of this again," he said huskily; "no good comes of reopening old wounds, and mine was very deep—deeper than I myself knew at the time. A fool's paradise, and such an awaking!"

"Yes," said Lord Maurice, "it was very hard."

There was a moment's silence. The two young men gazed steadily into the fire, both busied with thoughts that carried them far back to other days and other scenes.

Gabriel Drew broke it at last. He lifted his head from his folded arms, still keeping his eyes fixed on the glow of the leaping flames.

added gravely, "we all make mistakes at some period or another. But I feel more strongly on this point than I can explain, and I am not going to be bullied out of my opinion."

Lord Maurice smiled.

"Now," he said, "you do not talk like a clergyman."

Gabriel Drew's brow clouded instantly.

"You mean I have not adopted the cant with the cloth," he said. "That is true enough. I am condemned to a narrow enough bondage without that. It is hateful to me to be closed round with other men's opinions—with limitations of office. My profession and I are often at variance. I fear to be a hypocrite, and know I am likely to become one."

"No," interposed Lord Maurice, "there your wrong yourself. There is nothing hypocritical about you. But you grow morbid and dissatisfied. You live too much alone."

For the first time that night a little faint smile shadowed the grave lips of the young clergyman.

"If you think that, my friend, you should not blame me for taking unto myself a companion. It will be interesting to mould another life, to watch the individuality of another existence develop itself day by day. Do you not think so?"

For an instant a look of embarrassment crept into Lord Maurice's eyes.

"I—I never advised you of old," he said, "because I always looked upon your own judgment as more trustworthy than mine. I shall not attempt to begin now."

"No," said Gabriel Drew, "nor will I ask you. Come into the Vicarage with me, and see my Christmas present for yourself. She will be asleep, but no matter. She looks like an angel then."

"And are you going to call her that—that name?" asked Lord Maurice hesitatingly.

"Yes. It is fanciful and pretty. I don't know that it altogether suits her. One pictures a Lilian as fair, and saint-like, and gentle. This child is dark, and full of fire, and energy, and wilfulness. Yet she has her charm," he added with a sigh.

"I hope," said Lord Maurice impulsively, "that you will never have cause to regret what you have done."

"God alone knows," said Gabriel Drew, with solemn meaning. "It must be as He wills."

The child was asleep on the couch in the study. She having firmly refused to go to bed until her protector returned. This information was given to Gabriel Drew as he and his friend were admitted by the woman he had engaged as the child's attendant.

Full of curiosity, Lord Maurice entered the room. The little creature lay on a heap of shawls, and was covered over with one of bright crimson that made a spot of colour in the otherwise sombre room.

Gabriel Drew turned up the light of the lamp, and then walked across to her side. His friend followed, and they both stood looking down at the face before them. The dusky tumbled curls, the soft flushed cheeks, the long curling eye-lashes, made up a charming picture of childish beauty.

Yet even as the two men stood gazing in involuntary admiration she stirred, and opened her eyes, and the spell was broken. For into the big, deep orbs came the elfin gleam that Gabriel Drew knew so well by this time, and she sat up and looked calmly at the two faces. "Is you come back?" she asked the young clergyman. "Who that man?"

"This gentleman is a friend of mine," said Gabriel Drew. "Give him a kiss and say you are glad to see him."

"The child drew back and shook her head. "Lil does not like him," she said defiantly, "he naughty man."

Lord Maurice laughed at this sweeping denunciation of his character—but there was an uncomfortable flush on his cheek. "How do you know!" he asked. "You have never seen me before?"

She gave no answer, only looked at him with those strange, perplexing eyes. Then, after a moment's observation, she turned to Gabriel Drew, and, with one of her rare impulses of tenderness, took his hand and laid her soft, flushed cheek against it.

"Send bad man away," she said, "and put Lil to bed."

"No, no," said Gabriel Drew sternly. "Lil is rude. She must go to bed with Hannah. But she may say her prayers to me first."

The child set her tiny scarlet mouth defiantly. "No, Lil will not say prayers," she affirmed. "Lil not like bad man to hear her."

Gabriel Drew could not help laughing. "She has formed

a very unflattering opinion of you," he said. "And she is as obstinate as a little mule when she likes. I fear we should have to stand here all night trying to convince her, and then she would just dance off and repeat the same thing again."

"She seems a most extraordinary child," said Lord Maurice thoughtfully, as he stood there stroking his fair moustache, and gazing at the little sprite. "It's evident I have not taken her fancy. Do what she wishes, Gabriel—take her to bed, and I'll wait here till you come back."

Nothing loth, Gabriel Drew lifted the little creature in his arms and bore her off. His friend, meanwhile, sat himself down by the fire, and gazed into it with darkening brow, that seemed weighted with troubled thoughts. The house was very silent, and a sense of awe and oppression seemed to creep over his brain. Moment after moment drifted on. Gabriel did not return. He looked at the timepiece. It was close on midnight. Mechanically he watched the hand moving on, waiting for the sound of the striking hour. As it neared the figure, a slight, very slight noise made him turn his head. His eyes fell on the window that opened to the garden. The blind was not drawn, and as he turned it seemed to him that a face looked from the outer circle of darkness into the light and warmth of the room within.

As his gaze rested on it—fascinated, bewildered, awed—the eyes slowly turned, and met his own in a fixed and horrified glare. Scarcely a second did eye meet eye, and face looked back to face. Then, one faded shadow-like into the obscurity of night; and the other, ghostly and drawn with inward agony, took its place at the other side of the window, and sought, but vainly, to peer into the dim vista that lay beyond.

"It must have been fancy," he muttered, as at last he turned his eyes away. "Of course it was fancy. What else could it be? I must be mad to think of such a possibility!"

Then the door opened, and Gabriel Drew entered; but the apology he had begun halted on his lips, as he looked at that pale and altered face. "My dear fellow," he cried wonderingly, "what has happened? You look as if you had seen a ghost, or were meditating on a murder—or—come and sit down," he went on hurriedly. "Are you ill?"

"I—don't know," muttered Lord Maurice stupidly, as he dropped into the nearest chair. "I have a strange feeling *here*."

He laid his hand on his heart as he spoke; his very lips were white and shaking. Gabriel Drew was alarmed. He went over to a small cabinet, and, unlocking it, took out a bottle and glass, and poured out some of the spirit and brought it to his friend. Lord Maurice drank it off. The colour came back to his face and lips, the shaking of his hand ceased. With a supreme effort he raised his head and controlled his features.

"Thanks," he said, "I can't think what came over me. I fancy sometimes my heart's not strong."

"You ought to consult a doctor," said the young clergyman gravely. "You looked very bad just now. A young fellow like you has no business to go off like that. You were all right when I left the room."

"Yes," he said; "and I'm all right now. Don't look so grave. You know my heart was never my strong point even in the old days. There—do not be anxious. There's nothing to make a fuss about. Just let me rest here by your fire for another half hour, and I can walk home without any fear."

"Don't go home to-night," urged Gabriel Drew. "You can have my room, and I'll sleep on the sofa here. I'm sure you're not fit to walk."

"Nonsense!" cried the young fellow irritably. "Fit! I am as fit as ever I was. The fresh air will do me good."

"Then, I will go back with you—at least, part of the way," said the clergyman firmly. "I'm not going to incur your father's blame, I can tell you."

"There's no need for you to trouble," exclaimed Lord Maurice almost petulantly. "I am quite well; I've had these attacks before."

"You will have them," said Gabriel Drew, "once too often if you don't take care. Take my advice and see some good physician. Your life is not your own to play fast and loose with; it is a responsible and precious gift. If you will not be advised by me, I must inform your father of the state of affairs. I give you fair warning."

Lord Maurice laughed a little nervously.

"You always managed to have your own way," he said. "I'll promise to see some big gun in the medical

way next time I go up to London. Will that satisfy you?"

"Yes," said his friend gravely, and he stirred the fire into a blaze and drew his chair up closer. "Now come and sit here and tell me what you think of the child."

"What she thinks of me would be more to the purpose, I fancy," said Lord Maurice. "She evidently did not 'take' to me, as the nurses say. But she is a lovely little creature; I don't wonder you're fond of her."

"So would you be if you knew her better," said Gabriel Drew. "She is wonderfully interesting."

The face of the young lord grew a shade paler.

"I am glad," he said, "you find her so. It will make your self-imposed task easier. But," and his voice faltered slightly and he looked away into the fire, "as I live, Drew, I would give half my fortune to know whose child she is, and why she was sent in such an extraordinary way."

Gabriel Drew looked quietly up; his eyes were dark and serious, his mouth set into stern lines expressive of inward determination.

"I feel," he said calmly, "that I shall find out the mystery yet."

CHAPTER V.

A YEAR had come and gone. Once more it was Christmas Eve, and once more busy workers were assembled in Wyndhurst Church, completing the final decorations.

Moving to and fro among the group, and specially distinguished by an inexhaustible energy and good humour, was a little white-haired man, who seemed on the best of terms with the ladies. He mounted ladders, and nailed up wreaths, chatting and laughing all the time with the greatest spirit and merriment. To Mrs. Hope and Miss Summers he was especially devoted, and the latter lady played of her ancient coquetties upon him in a manner delightful to see.

The old gentleman had only lately come to Wyndhurst, and was lodging in the High street, over a shop. He was supposed to possess archæological tastes of no common order, and stated that he was a member of a Club whose chief aim was research into this most interesting of studies. He was particularly devoted to the church, and could be found there at all times and seasons.

Mrs. Hope had taken him up warmly, and therefore Miss Summers followed suit, and in her train came meekly the ancient spinsterhood of the town. Mr. Milner, in fact, had become quite popular with everyone, save and except the Vicar.

That gentleman treated him with remarkable coldness, thereby succeeding in making himself still more unpopular than he had already become by his conduct with regard to the child. The women, one and all, had set themselves against him on this point, and cold looks and scanty courtesy had been his portion whenever he went among his richer brethren. On the other hand, the poorer class regarded his action as the outcome of a charitable and benevolent nature—such a nature as showed itself to them in any hour of trial, or sorrow, or difficulty. On the whole, the past year had not been a pleasant one for Gabriel Drew, and the lines on his brow had grown deeper, and the sternness of face more marked, even as he moved, stately, and calm, and impassive, amidst his congregation, to all appearance utterly indifferent to what they were saying or doing.

This coldness and imperturbability angered many of them beyond expression. It was nothing to them that the Vicar's life was blameless; that he was universally respected; that he was kind, and generous, and unselfish in his actions. No—he had dared to do a thing of which they disapproved; and, after they had conveyed such disapprobation to him as plainly as possible, he had gone calmly on his way with an utter disregard of their sentiments and opinions.

Among the leaders of this party were Mrs. Hope and Miss Summers. They were not a little amazed therefore when on this eventful Christmas Eve, as they were all resting and surveying their labours, the vestry door swung back on its hinges, and the Vicar himself appeared leading the obnoxious little waif by the hand.

The child looked lovely enough to win anyone's heart, but there was nothing but anger and contempt in the stony eyes that met her own, as in her fanciful scarlet coat and cap she stood there by the side of her protector, and glanced curiously at the lights, and flowers, and brilliant decorations of the beautiful old church.

It was the first time she had been there since her own discovery; but she had no memory of that, though others had, and the little group of women drew themselves stiffly

and coldly together, as if bound by one common impulse of animosity.

Gabriel Drew, after that brief pause, advanced and moved from place to place, examining the decorations, and pointing them out to the child. He bowed courteously to the workers, but otherwise took no notice of their presence or their frigid looks. He was well used to the latter by this time. Presently the child, with her usual restlessness, danced away from him, and, discovering a ladder leaning against one of the Gothic pillars, she mounted it, and perched herself on the top, looking like a scarlet bird against the background of the dark laurel wreaths.

As she sat up there, delighted with the novelty of the situation, she suddenly saw another face peer round the other side of the pillar—an old face, and a merry face apparently, for it beamed and smiled on her in most friendly fashion.

The sprite regarded it attentively for a moment, and then said coolly: "How do, old man? What you want up there?"

The individual laughed good-humouredly.

"Why, what fairy is this?" he said. "How did you get up here?"

"Climbed it," said the child, who could talk now very distinctly.

"And who are you?" pursued the questioner.

"I'm Lill," she responded.

"Lil—but what's your other name? Where are your papa and mamma?"

"Lil got none," said the small elf coolly. "The angels brought Lil in a bastik, and put her there," pointing to the pulpit. "Now she lives with Guardy. Some day the angels take Lil back—if she good."

"Oh," said her questioner, smiling. "So you're Lil, and you live with the kind gentleman down there"—and he pointed to where Gabriel Drew stood, gravely surveying the altar.

The child nodded. Then she pointed with her tiny forefinger to the group of women far below:

"Nasty old women," she said, her eyes flashing defiantly; "Lil hates them!"

"Indeed!" said the old man, with a faint chuckle. "But that is naughty; you shouldn't hate anybody."

"Are you the 'Black Man'?" asked the child suddenly.
 "The 'Black Man,'" faltered the old gentleman in amaze. "Whom do you mean?"

"Lil thought you might be," she said gravely. "Does he ever come to church?"

"I don't know," answered Mr. Milner, in astonishment. "I never heard of him."

"Never heard of him," she echoed mockingly. "Lil got pictures of him. Lil would like him to take all the old women away."

She nodded fiercely at them, as if impelled by intense animosity. Then she looked curiously at her new acquaintance.

"What are you doing up there?" she demanded.

"Nailing these pretty flowers up," he answered. "Now tell me something about yourself and how you came here. Surely someone put you into that basket. Was it mother?"

Lil suddenly rose to her feet, perching in airy fashion on her ladder with utter disregard of danger.

"Guardy," she called out, at the top of her small clear voice, "come here and tell the old man who brought Lil to you."

There was a moment's dead silence. Every eye turned instinctively towards the fantastic little figure perched up among the shadows like a brilliant tropical bird. Calm and grave as ever the Vicar advanced towards the child.

"Come down from there, Lil," he said, "or else you'll fall."

"Lil won't come down," she answered defiantly, "not till you tell the ugly, cross old women how the angels brought the bastik to you in the church."

"This is scandalous," exclaimed the outraged spinsters. "Infamous;" "Insulting;" "Disgraceful."

"Mr. Drew," exclaimed Mrs. Hope, making herself spokeswoman as usual, "I must beg of you to remove that child from the church. Your own conduct with regard to her is bad enough; but to bring her up to insult her elders and superiors is a proceeding utterly unworthy of a minister of the church."

"Pardon me, madam," said the young clergyman, his face growing a shade paler, "the child's sentiments are her own, and the result of her own observation on the treatment she has received. I am not responsible for them."

"She is a little monster of depravity!" hissed Miss Summers venomously. "We have borne with the scandal of her presence too long already. I, for one, take this opportunity of informing you, Mr. Drew, that if you do not instantly send that child out of the parish, I shall never set foot in your church again."

"Nor I;" "nor I;" "nor I;" echoed around in various accents of approval and acquiescence.

The young clergyman looked gravely at the crowd of angry faces. His eyes flashed and grew dark with wrath.

"You must of course please yourselves, ladies," he said. "The house of God is free to all. But you mistake if you think that a groundless and unchristian prejudice on your part will alter my conduct, or control the freedom of my actions. I found this poor little waif homeless and deserted; no other shelter was offered her, and I took her to my home. She has made her own place there and won her own right to remain. It rests with you to prove that I have none to keep her, or that my doing so in any way offends that law of Christian charity I have done my best to preach."

There was a dead silence throughout the church. Confusion, hatred, defiance, sat sullenly on the faces grouped there in that sacred place.

Then the silence was broken by a peal of defiant childish laughter, as the object of all this controversy sprang suddenly to the topmost rung of the ladder and began one of her elfin dances on that insecure resting-place.

Gabriel Drew's face grew stern.

"Come down, Lilian," he repeated; "come down at once."

A little silvery peal of laughter, a momentary cessation of the fairy-like movements, and then——!

To his dying day Gabriel Drew could never forget the horror of that second of time, when a little flash of scarlet fluttered through the air, and the silence was pierced by the crash of the falling ladder, and, more horrible still, a dull, heavy thud, that echoed from the stones at his feet.

He did not cry out or speak; he only rushed forwards and lifted the little figure—lifted it while a faint moan of agony left the paling lips, and seemed to stab his heart like a knife. One look from the dark eyes to his—one little gasp—"Lil, sorry——" then the little dusky head fell against his shoulder.

Silently he rose, and looked at the crowd of awed and horror-struck faces.

"There will be no need for you to leave the church—now," he said, coldly and distinctly.

Then he turned away, holding the little creature tenderly in his arms, and once more, as on that other Christmas Eve, bore her swiftly through the darkening night to the desolate home she had brightened for so brief a space.

"Killed—no," said Dr. Hope to his wife that evening, in answer to her enquiries. "It would have been far better had she been ; she will live on for a time—it may be long or short—but she will suffer terribly."

"And what does he say ?" asked Mrs. Hope, in a somewhat subdued manner.

"He ? Well, you women may go on how you like about Drew, but he's a thorough good fellow. I—" and the Doctor's voice grew somewhat husky—"I never saw anything so touching as the way in which he tends her, and her love for him."

Mrs. Hope was silent. Her husband thought she was impressed, and perhaps remorseful.

The next time she saw Miss Summers she said confidentially :

"Depend upon it, my dear, we are right. I'm sure it's his own child. They say his devotion and attention are most touching. No doubt her mother was some disgraceful person, and he's hidden her away somewhere. Talk of charity, indeed ! Nonsense !"

CHAPTER VI.

MR. MILNER took a great interest in the accident and the consequent illness of Child Lilian. He called at the Vicarage constantly, and begged so hard for permission to see her that Gabriel Drew at last relented, and he was allowed to sit by her couch and bring her his offerings of flowers, and fruit, and toys, as often as he pleased. They became great friends at last in a quiet, unconventional sort of way. Alas ! all the sprightliness and elfin mischief had left Child Lilian now. She was so still, so patient, so gentle, that Gabriel Drew often wondered if she could indeed be the same child. At times she suffered terribly, so terribly that it wrung his heart to

watch her, or meet the dumb anguish of her eyes. Often the tears filled his own, and then she would repress her groans, and pat his hand, and murmur her plaintive little self-reproach :

"Lil so sorry she was naughty; Lil never disobey you again."

And Gabriel Drew would only kiss the little quivering mouth, and declare that she might disobey him as much as she pleased, if only she would get well and strong, and be his bright little elfin playmate once again.

But that could never be—never, never !—as he knew and felt, even while he tried to cheat himself and her.

No one came near them those dreary winter days, save Mr. Milner. A few enquiries had been made at the door, but Gabriel Drew had sternly forbidden admittance to any one of that uncharitable body of female workers and disciplinarians who were at once so zealous and so narrow-minded.

His friend, Lord Maurice, was away, and had been away for many months. His health had completely broken down, the doctors said, and he had gone to Algiers by their advice. At no time of his life had Gabriel Drew felt so alienated from his fellow man, so alone in his interests and pursuits, as now.

Sometimes a callous misery possessed him. At others a bitterness and contempt towards his flock and a hatred of his surroundings usurped his whole mind, and excluded all softer feelings.

But in these lonely days and nights—sitting by the child's side, watching her sufferings, touched by her patience—it often seemed to him that a Will inscrutable and compelling was working out for him the truth of many mysteries he had never solved, beckoning him with the force of Destiny across a rough and stony path over which his feet for long had stumbled. Bitterly enough he felt that his faith had been but a poor and false thing, that when his spoken words had burned with greatest eloquence, he, in the core and centre of his being, had known them as untrue in the spirit.

He had ample leisure now for memory and self-examination. It was a sad and miserable time, and one that would leave its mark on all his future.

The new year had come in wild and stormy, with heavy

falls of snow, and bitter winds. There had been much sickness too among the poor, and Gabriel Drew had many calls on his time and means. He never cared what he denied himself if he lightened another's burden, or relieved the want and suffering of another life.

One cold and dreary night he returned home somewhat later than usual. At the gates he met old Mr. Milner, who was leaving.

"I have been sitting with the child," the old man said in his genial way. "She has been very cheerful. I think she is better, decidedly better."

Gabriel Drew answered somewhat indifferently. He was weary and spent; and the light, jovial voice jarred unpleasantly on his ears. He hurried in. The little invalid couch was drawn up before his study fire. The crimson shawl, which the child always loved to have over her, made its usual spot of brightness; but the face, which it used to set off so brilliantly, looked pitifully white and shrunken as it lay against the snowy pillows, though a momentary flush of joy lit up the wasted features at sight of the presence she loved.

"You have been a long, long time," she said, holding out her little wasted hand to draw him nearer. "Lil is so tired. She wanted you."

"Oh, my pet," he cried remorsefully, "I am so sorry. I could not help it. But Mr. Milner has been sitting with you, he tells me. You have not been lonely, have you?"

She smiled faintly. "He has been telling Lil funny stories," she said. "But Lil loves Guardy best."

Gabriel Drew sat down beside the couch, and rang for tea. He was wet, and cold, and tired, and there was something inexpressibly homelike and calm about his surroundings, that soothed him after his day's labours.

"What were the funny stories, pet?" he asked gently, as he took the small transparent hand in his, and gazed with sorrowful and ever-recurring forebodings on the little face he had grown to love so dearly.

"One was about a little girl like Lil," she said gravely. "I didn't think that was funny. She belonged to someone who was very beautiful and very wicked, and did not care for little children, and so she sent her far, far away, saying that when she grew big and clever she would come and take her back again. And the little girl was very unhappy,

though were she lived there was a kind person who let her run about in a beautiful garden and play the whole day long. But one day the little girl fell into a long, long sleep, and when she woke there was no garden, and no one she knew, only a strange face looking at her that she had never seen. Then she found that she was in a new house, and all was strange about her ; and some people were kind, and some were not ; but she was very happy and——"

"Lil," cried Gabriel Drew, his voice breaking stormily against the child's pathetic tone, "what is this you are saying? Is it your own story?"

"No," she said, surprised. "It is as Mr. Milner told me. Do you know the little girl?"

He turned his head aside. "No," he said, in a low, troubled voice. "Go on."

"The little girl lived a long time with the kind friend," resumed Lil, "and then one day a grand carriage came to the door, and a beautiful lady, all dressed in gold and satin like a queen, got out of the carriage, and she said she had come to fetch the little girl home."

"And did she go?" asked Gabriel Drew, as there came a pause in the carefully repeated story.

"No," she would not go ; for she loved the new friend so well that she would not leave him."

"Him?" echoed Gabriel Drew, as he turned and gazed searchingly into the wistful face.

"I think," said the child quaintly, "it was 'him,' for the little girl liked 'hims' best ; and so," she added, with one of her old gleaming smiles, "does Lil."

Then Hannah entered with the tea, and Gabriel Drew busied herself with giving the child the dainty cakes and warm milk that always accompanied his meal as her share. When he had done this, and was leaning back slowly sipping his tea, his eyes fell on a bundle of newspapers on a table near by.

"What are those?" he asked the child, as he saw her glances follow his own.

"Mr. Milner left them," she said. "From London."

He stretched out his arm and drew the packet towards him. He saw several London papers, and wondered why the old gentleman should have left them for his perusal. It was a very unusual proceeding. After he had finished his tea and watched the child's languid attempts to enjoy her own, he

opened the parcel and took out the papers one by one. A paragraph in one of the columns was marked, and attracted his attention immediately. He read it, and his face changed and grew pale and perplexed. This was what he saw.

"Child Lilian is dangerously ill. Come to Vicarage, Wyndhurst, for news."

The paper dropped unheeded on the floor. Who had done this? who had inserted this advertisement without sanction or authority from himself? The more he thought of it the more perplexed he became. Was it the Doctor, or his old enemy, Mrs. Hope? or, could it be genial old Mr. Milner? No—that last conjecture seemed impossible. What object could the friendly old archæologist have in thus interfering between the child and himself? Yet, to the best of his recollection, Mr. Milner was the only person who had ever heard Lil speak of the mysterious personage whose identity was still undiscovered, and who had baffled all his researches and enquires.

The child's quick eye read the disturbance on his face.

"Are you cross with Lil?" she asked suddenly, "or the papers?"

He turned his grave and troubled face to hers.

"Child Lilian," he said, in tones stern and solemn, such as he never used to her, "you came to me like a spirit of the past, and the past like a pale ghost glides between us now, when you have grown into my heart and I love you as my own. What is the mystery of your presence? where is the end and the purpose it foretold——"

His voice faltered and broke, and his eyes grew absorbed and seemed to look far away into a space peopled by his own dark memories.

"I love you," he cried aloud. "The child who came to me in my life's darkest hour. God sent you, and by God's help none shall wrest you from me while you live."

As the passionate words left his lips—as the child over whom he bent awed and only half comprehending, wound her weak arms round his neck and murmured fondly, "Lil loves you—Lil will never go away," in fond reiteration—his ear sharp and strained by a presentiment of impending evil, caught the faint sound of footsteps on the path without.

The curtains were drawn over the study window, but a sharp imperative rap came on the glass. Involuntarily he put the child's arms from about his throat, and crossed the intervening space, and so found himself looking at a wild white face that flashed its terror and entreaty in mute demand for admission.

He raised the sash. He felt no consciousness of why he did it, only that he was impelled by some controlling force such as moves our wills in dreams. With the rush of keen air came also a hurried entrance, a few broken words, the touch of a woman's draperies that swept past his feet all cold and wet with sleet and snow of the stormy winter night. And then——"

He only knew that he closed the window by sheer mechanical impulse; he only knew that dazed, and cold, and full of strange and passionate fear he stood there gazing as one gazes at the fulfilment of a long hope, while through the silence ran the bitterness of a broken cry:

"My child!—Oh! my little child!"

CHAPTER VII.

ACROSS that couch of pain—across the slight, small figure of the dying child—two faces looked at each other bewildered, questioning, with a certain dull apprehension beating in either heart.

The child lay there quite still, perplexed by the sudden appearance of a visitor—and such a visitor! The woman was young, and very beautiful, and richly dressed, but her face was ghastly white, and her eyes—the dark, solemn, changeful eyes of Child Lilian—glittered with a cold hard light.

Suddenly she rose to her feet, and keeping one hand on the couch, spoke in a low, repressed voice:

"How you look!" she said. "You remember, of course you remember——. You did not expect we should meet again." Then she looked round in a quick, restless manner. "Where is—he!" she asked.

"He? Whom do you mean?" asked Gabriel Drew sternly.

"Surely," she said, flushing hotly as her eye sank before his stern gaze, "you know. I mean your friend. Is he not here? I saw him the last time I came."

It was Gabriel Drew's turn now to look confused.

"You saw him here? My friend?"

"Your friend," she said impatiently. "Maurice Drew, who was with you on that tour in Wales."

Gabriel Drew's face grew white as death.

"Do you mean to say," he muttered hoarsely, "that you don't know—that he never told you——"

"Told me—what?" she said, and the heavy cloak fell from her shoulders, and she drew herself up, quivering, palpitating with vivid life. A beautiful, passionate creature, with something tameless and defiant in her very beauty.

Gabriel Drew looked at her, and memory rent asunder the fabric of calmness and self-control.

"You are Lilian," he said, "the woman who ruined my life and tortured my youth. Answer me one question: is this child yours?"

The colour faded from her cheek; the passionate vitality seemed to die out, and leave only a drooping, sorrowful woman, with head bent as in shame, and eyes full of hot and sudden tears.

"Yes," she said faintly, "she is mine and—Maurice Drew's. We—we deceived you, I know, but——"

"Be silent!" he cried, and wrath and bitter hate seemed to leap into his eyes and transform his whole face. "There is no Maurice Drew; I am Gabriel Drew, and he, Maurice only took my name—that—time. It was begun in jest, because he would not use his title. Then he met you and kept it up. I promised not to tell the secret until he gave me leave; and you so lured me on that I forgot all save your beauty and my mad love."

Then his voice broke: he turned aside. "He was my friend," he said bitterly; "it was meet he should deceive me. And you——"

"I," she said faintly, "I did not love you, and I was not—free."

"But Maurice," cried Gabriel Drew suddenly, "what of him? How can I comprehend this story you tell? It is worse than I ever believed. Have I been duped by both?"

She sank slowly down on her knees by the couch.

"How can I tell you," she faltered; "how can I ask you to pity me? and yet, if you only knew my misery—my sufferings."

A sob broke the low and faltering words, but her eyes were dry as she fixed them on the wondering child.

"I told you," she said, "the truth; but him—I deceived. So we were married secretly, and for months I was happy, so happy that I told myself that the miserable past was forgotten—that I had nothing more to fear. You had gone away. He seldom spoke of you, and we lived there among the wild Welsh hills through all that blissful summer time. I felt so safe there; it seemed impossible that anyone would ever track me out, or trouble me again. Three months my dream lasted, and then one day I saw again the evil face I had hated and dreaded. He had tracked me and found me. There was no help. I dared not tell Maurice. He had threatened his life if I did not give him up; and I—oh, wicked!—vile as I am, I loved him so dearly—so dearly——"

Again the choking sobs stayed her utterance. There was a long pause; a pause into which Gabriel Drew gathered such pity as he could for the weak and erring nature that had once shrined for him his ideal woman. He gazed at the bowed head, the drooping figure, and into his eyes came that strained and agonised look which in a man outweighs a hundredfold the anguish of tears that women shed. He gazed, and suddenly strength seemed to forsake him. He dropped into a chair near by, and bent his head upon his arms, and waited for her to go on with her miserable tale.

"I went away," she resumed presently. "I left a letter telling him that I was tired of the quiet, and the poverty, and simplicity; that I had married him under a false name, and considered there was no legal tie to bind me. I wrote it—I wanted him to think me bad—but I think it broke my heart. I became a desperate, savage creature whom henceforth all men feared and hated. Then—the child came, and I knew I could not keep her with me, and I put her with a woman I had known long, long before. I thought she would be kind to her, and I think she was; but she was very poor, and I—I found it so hard to get money. Trouble came on her and she had to leave her farm, and I found she had gone to another part of the country, taking the child with her. For some time I lost sight of her—then I had her traced here, and—one night I was desperate enough to come to the place—and then I heard your name,

and I felt I must gaze once more upon my Maurice—so wronged—so loved. I found my way in—I stood where I stood to-night—and I saw him where I saw you. Then I grew alarmed and dared not stay, and went away back to London life."

"And your husband? Was he what he had been?" asked Gabriel Drew as she paused again.

"Worse, I think," she said, her eyes growing stormy and fierce once more. "I know he hated me—but I did not care. I had one friend—a man kind and clever, and who pitied my miserable lot—and in a moment of weakness I confided part of my secret to him. He promised to find out what had become of the child, and let me know if he discovered anything. We arranged that it was to be done by advertising—for no letters were safe that I received. I saw the advertisement at last—and I came here as secretly as I could during one of my husband's mysterious absences."

Then she took the child's hands in hers and gazed with passionate regret at the pale and wasted face.

"Tell me," she cried imploringly, "that she will be better soon—she is all I have to keep a tender thought alive within my wicked heart!"

Gabriel drew lifted his face, white and drawn now with exceeding pain.

"I cannot tell you that," he said. "Her fate has gone from human hands; it is but a question of weeks—or days."

A faint cry came from the woman's lips.

"How came she here," she asked presently, "and with you?"

"She was brought to the church," said Gabriel Drew, "on Christmas Eve, a twelvemonth back. I found her there. No one would give her home or shelter. No one could fathom the mystery of her strange appearance. In pity for her desolate lot I kept her with me here, giving her the name I found affixed to her pillow——"

"Child Lilian," faltered the mother, gazing still with wide devouring eyes at the little wistful face; "the name I called her in my sorrow and shame—the name I told the woman who deserted her——!" Then she rose to her feet and looked across at him. "To think," she said, "that you should have done this—you of all men."

"It was God's will," he answered slowly. "He uses strange instruments to work out His purposes."

"And her—father," faltered the poor creature hesitatingly, "has he ever seen her?"

"But twice, I think," answered Gabriel Drew. "She disliked him, strange to say, and never could bear him to come here."

"And the name?" she said, "did he not wonder at that?"

"We both did," said Gabriel Drew; and he, too, rose, and they stood one on either side of the child, whose eyes were closing now for very weariness of this strange scene.

"You—you are a good man," murmured the woman in a stifled voice. "How shall I thank—what can I say to you? I wronged you so deeply once, and this—this is your revenge. Coals of fire on my unworthy head!"

"You forget," said Gabriel Drew sternly, "that I knew nothing as to who the child was. Do not thank me. I don't need it, and assuredly I don't deserve it. I have grown to love her very dearly," he added falteringly. "This has been a terrible blow."

The mother's face grew suddenly hard and cold.

"It is better so," she muttered, holding one hand to her bosom as if to strifle some pain that held its seat of torture there. "Better so—than that she live to know of the guilty, erring wretch who gave her life—whose memory can never be aught but shame and reproach! And yet I could have loved her—I could have been a good and tender mother—had Fate not held me back. I know what is in my heart, it is not all evil, and my child could have led me to better thing perhaps—but now—what is there to hold me back——"

"The memory of an angel waiting to claim your love in another and better life," said Gabriel Drew with strange gentleness. "Try and hold that hope before you as a light that will guide you over the dark places of the world."

"I am not good—like you," she said mournfully; "and my life has been too hard for me. You—you do not know half its miseries, or half its shame."

"And even if I did," he said gently, "I would not condemn you to the darkness you deem your portion. Have I not sinned too? Does any mortal live who can say, 'I am pure'? And don't call me good, even in your thoughts. It hurts me! it is an endless reproach."

She looked at him bewildered, and but half comprehending the meaning of his words. At that moment the child stirred and opened her eyes. Seeing them both so close, she stretched out a hand to each.

They clasped the child's hands, standing silent one on either side of the little crippled figure. It seemed to Gabriel Drew as if in that moment a tumultuous rush of new and vivid life forced itself through his veins, as if at last he understood the meaning of suffering and trial, the torture of wasted years and vain doubts, the purpose fulfilled by this little waif of hnmmaity; this stray soul, born of shame and bitter sorrow, yet working out in its own small sphere a plan of retributive justice.

The child's voice, faint and weak, broke the silence.

"Are you the beautiful lady," she asked, "who was to come for the little girl? But Lil is not your little girl, and she won't leave Guardy."

"She drew her hand away from her mother's clasp and turned to Gabriel Drew, according to him spontaneously that rare tenderness which made the charm of her contradictory nature. The woman drew back a step and looked at them both.

"She is right," she said humbly, "she knows who is worthy to be loved."

"Not so," he cried remorsefully, "it is but a child's freak. She is used to me, and you are strange."

Then he bent over the child and whispered something in her ear; but she was tired and peevish, and only clung to him more closely.

"Take Lil to bed," she said plaintively; "she is so tired now."

"Yes, take her," said the woman, her voice broken and full of pain. "My sin has worked out its own punishment—I am not wanted here."

Something in the tone and words seemed to touch the child's wayward heart. She turned her head, and looked thoughtfully at the beautiful, haggard face.

"Lil will kiss you," she said, "for you look sorry."

Then tears rained down from the hard and straining eyes.

"My little one—my heart—may Heaven forgive me; for I did love you, Lil; I did love you!"

She kissed the child again and again, then rose to her feet, and drew her cloak about her.

"I will go now," she said, "I am not wanted; yet I felt I must see her. There was something—some memory tugging at my heart-strings, try how I might to forget. But she is better without me—I will not come again."

Silently, sadly their eyes met over the pathetic silence of that little broken life.

Twice Gabriel Drew essayed to speak, but words would not come. At last with strong effort his voice obeyed his will, and he took the little figure up in his arms.

"Wait here," he said, "till I return; I have something more to say."

Mechanically she bowed her head and watched him leave the room; the little dusky head lying contentedly on his shoulder, the sleepy, childish eyes turned lovingly to his face.

Then with a stifled groan she dropped into a chair, and buried her face in her hands. She did not move—so it seemed to her—for a long, long time. Then something—a step, or sound—roused her. She lifted her head, and gazed with wide eyes at the form and face of a man who stood in the doorway of the dimly-lighted room. A cry—a gasp—and she started to her feet, her arms outstretched in an agony of supplication.

"Maurice! Good Heaven, is it you?"

He drew coldly back.

"How did—you—come here?" he said, glancing round the vacant room. There was no welcome in his voice, and in his eyes a look came that made her shudder and turn sick at heart.

"Oh, Maurice," she cried appealingly, "don't look at me like that! I have wronged you I know, but——"

"Wronged me!" he said, and his voice thrilled to her inmost soul. "And after all these years that is all you have to say?"

A cold, dogged look came over her face. She folded her arms across her breast and looked back at him with answering defiance.

"Yes," she said, "you condemned me long ago, I can't expect you to pardon me now."

"You deserted me heartlessly," he said, "without warrant or excuse. You made me false to my best friend; you fooled me with the belief that you loved me——"

"I did love you," she interrupted passionately.

"Wicked, degraded as I am, at least believe that. I left you because—because—I knew I was not your wife."

"Not—my—wife!" he echoed, gazing blankly at her white face and gleaming eyes. "What do you mean?"

"Yes before I ever met you," she said, "I ran away from home with a man who represented himself to be a captain in the army. He was nothing but a gambler—a blackleg—a vicious, depraved brute, who took me from home and love to be the slave and decoy he needed for his infamous schemes. I loathed my life; I loathed myself; and, most of all, I loathed him. At last, some infamous project brought in its train discovery and punishment. He was condemned to a long period of imprisonment. Then I felt free once more. I procured that situation as companion, which I held when I met you and your friend in Wales. I had changed my name. I had put my hateful past out of mind. I wanted to be free; to have my share of love, and light, and joy. One day I had news that he and another man had escaped from Portland; had been pursued, tracked, and that, at last, in a fight with the warders, he had been killed. Then—at last—I threw off the blight that had so long oppressed me, and listened to your prayers to become your wife. I so dreaded that you might ever learn who I was, that I only too readily agreed to a secret marriage. You know whether we were happy or not."

"Yes," he said, as she paused, "I know—to my cost."

"Three months," she resumed drearily; "three months only went by, and then I learned that the fiend who had wrecked my life was not dead. Under another name he lived. He had resumed his old practices; more, he hunted me out, and demanded my return—or your life. What could I do?"

He drew a long, sharp breath for the first time since he had set foot in that room. He looked at her with a momentary glance of softness and compassion.

"I would rather," he said bitterly, "that he had taken my life than that you should have betrayed my love."

"I thought you would forget," she sobbed. "I went away, but only on one condition: never again should he consider me as his wife or claim me as such. Under that promise I shared his schemes once more. All the opprobrium of my false position I willingly bore; it was my

penance for the wrong I had done you. Then—the child came, and I felt happy in her love and in the new interests and care she brought. Ah, you start—you do not know—you never imagined——"

"A child!" he gasped in horror, "and ours. What have you done with it?"

She paused and looked down at the little couch, where still the crimson shawl lay gleaming against the snowy pillows.

"Have you never guessed?" she said hoarsely; "ask your friend."

He made no answer, only stood there trembling and ghastly, as one who beholds some spectral horror.

"Child Lilian," dropped faintly from his ashy lips.

"Yes," she said; "I called her that because of that poem you wrote—it was the only thing belonging to you that I kept."

"Oh," he cried, as one in mortal pain; this is too much—it is too horrible. To what a fate you condemned her—think of it—you a woman—a mother! If it had not been for Drew——"

"I only learnt that to-night," she said. "May Heaven bless him for his noble deed."

"And do you know what it has cost him?" cried Lord Maurice fiercely. "His position, his reputation, his career, perhaps! It is that which has brought me here to-night. The parish will not have him—evil tongues have been rife—they say this—this deed of purest charity is a scandal and a shame. My father, who, at my persuasion, gave him this living, has sent me here to-night to tell him that he must leave; and it is for us—for your sin, for my treachery, that this evil falls on this noble soul."

"Hush!" she cried warningly, and pointed to the door, where, white and silent, yet with something calm and grand in his face and aspect, stood the man they had both wronged.

He came straight to Lord Maurice, and held out his hand.

"Don't reproach yourself," he said. "I had made up my mind to leave here. I only waited your return to tell you so."

But Lord Maurice drew back shaken and ashamed to the very core of his heart.

"I can't take your hand," he said hoarsely. "I—I'm not worthy. I have deceived you all these years. I have let you suffer when a word might have put things straight. You don't know how mean, how cowardly——"

Gabriel Drew stayed his words by a gesture.

"Enough," he said. "I know the whole story. Do not reproach yourself any more. The hand of Fate has been in all plainly enough. I see that now. Sorrow, suffering, a broken faith, a broken law—but an evitable end for all——"

His voice broke; a deep and solemn light came into his eyes. The woman, abashed and humbled, sank slowly on her knees, her face hidden in the loose veil of her falling hair. The two men looked at her, and at each other. Deep pity and remorse spoke out in either glance. It was one of those solemn moments when spirit and soul shake off the trammels of earthly thoughts and earthly feelings, and behold the deeper and more solemn mysteries that show a wise purpose and an end fulfilled, after seemingly needless suffering and uncomprehended grief.

The room grew hushed and still. Gabriel Drew at last roused himself, and looked from the woman's kneeling form to the man's white, stern face.

"I was forgetting," he said hurriedly, "I had a message for you;" and he looked at the beautiful head, half raised at the sound of his voice. "The child," he said, "wishes to see you once more."

Slowly she rose to her feet in a dazed and stupefied way. Slowly and haltingly she took her way to the door of the room. There she paused and looked back, a piteous appeal in her eyes and in her white and haggard face. Gabriel Drew read that unspoken prayer with the quick, keen sympathy that was part of his nature. He turned, and touched the arm of the silent figure by his side.

"Go with her!" he said quickly; "it is your duty."

As if impelled by some constraining force Lord Maurice moved to the side of the weak and erring creature, the shadow of whose presence would for ever haunt his memory.

In silence Gabriel Drew followed, and beckoned them to the little chamber where weak and frail as a broken blossom, lay the dying child. In silence they stood beside the bed; but in the eyes of the man came an awful fear

and horror, as he looked at the changed face, wasted and drawn with pain, and altered, almost out of recognition, from the bright, elfish, sunny creature he remembered.

Involuntarily he turned to Gabriel Drew ; but he with warning gesture stayed the question on his lips.

"Not now," he said, "I will tell you again—do not disturb her now."

The child opened her languid eyes and looked from one to the other of the three faces ; then, with a faint spark of the old elfin mischief, she said :

"Lil will say good night ; but she loves Guardy best."

A month later Gabriel Drew stood up in the pulpit of Wyndhurst Church to preach his farewell sermon.

None present ever forgot that sermon—so simple, so earnest, breathing such humble faith, rebuking so gently the scoffs of the evil-minded, the harsh judgment of the proud and vainglorious. But he kept his friend's secret with all faith, nor tried to vindicate himself in the eyes of his judges, nor gave any clue to the mystery of that fateful Christmas Eve,

Apart, and severed by a mutual sin, dwelt the two lives whose fatal influence had once so nearly wrecked his own. Never in this world did they cross again. A wise purpose had been fulfilled ; a solemn lesson given ; and the simple story of a child's life found its sequel in but two words that marked a marble cross in the old churchyard of Wyndhurst :

A Knot in a Handkerchief.

CHAPTER I.

THE KNOT.

SHE was very, very pretty—but it was not that. She had a bunch of daffodils fastened carelessly at the throat of her brown coat—a reminder of spring and of the season when our late Laureate informs us “a young man’s fancy lightly turns to thoughts of love”—but it was not that. No. I distinctly repeat that neither the fair face, nor the brown eyes, nor the daffodils had anything to do with it. It was simply that, sitting opposite to her in that useful if not most aristocratic of vehicles, the “bus,” I observed that suddenly she drew out from her pocket a dainty scrap of cambric, which I suppose she would have termed a handkerchief, and proceeded, calmly and deliberately, to tie a knot in it.

Now I am not more curious than the generality of my sex; but, at the time of which I write, I had a way of studying my fellow man—and woman—in and out of omnibuses, for many reasons. I affected omnibuses as a means locomotion, though I should have preferred a private hansom, had I had the option of choice. That being denied me by the cruelty of Fate, I generally travelled Strandwards once or twice a day in the useful and inexpensive “bus,” and for an hour at least, that journey afforded me a fund of rich conjecture, and sometimes not a little amusement.

When I saw people dashing by in hansoms, victorias, buggies, and broughams, I said to myself, compassionately, “How much they miss!” They could not make acquaintance with the varied types of beings with whom I enjoyed speculative acquaintance—in omnibuses—and thereby must have lost one of the pleasures of life.

No. I could really almost afford to pity them when I considered the amount of amusement—not to say interest—I had derived from my omnibus acquaintances! What could my friends of the private hansom and the snug brougham know of the dear old lady, who invariably “tumbles” into her “bus,” and falls into the arms of her fellow

passengers with a blissful indifference as to their capacity for supporting or assisting her to a seat ; or of the helpless female who always has an umbrella, and always holds it in her arms in such a fashion that the handle and the point make alternate stabs at the faces and eyes of the passengers, and who never seems to have acquired the art of balance, by seizing the top rail, but just flops from side to side with feeble smile and useless apologies till some one fixes her in a seat ? Then there is the austere maiden, with smileless lips and stern eyes, who surveys her fellow-passengers as one who should say, "Don't attempt your frivolous remarks on weather or 'limited accommodation,' to me," who knows where she is going, and the exact fare, and pounces severely on the conductor if he should make a mistake in the change for a shilling. And the fidgety old lady who persistently shouts out her destination and jumps up excitedly at every stoppage thinking she has reached it. And the lady of uncertain age, who prods the conductor with her umbrella at all times and seasons, and offers her fare long before it is due, by way of complicating his calculations, and unburthening her own mind and purse. And the irate old gentleman, who always has a grievance and is always going to write to "the secretary and complain of incivility," as the notice of the company kindly suggests. Then there is the troublesome child, whose boots have such a charming faculty of acquainting themselves with the dresses, and coats, and shins on either sides of "it." I say "it," because I agree with certain rules of German grammar which ascribe the neuter gender to those sweet beings, until they have gained some sense or knowledge sufficient to endow them with the privilege of sex. And then there is the fat passenger, who never has room enough, but declines to take the hint that payment for the double space occupied so tranquilly, might suit the relative convenience of "the squasher" and "the squashee." And the thin passenger, who drifts to the roomiest side—as naturally as the fat passenger to the most crowded—perhaps on the principle of "Like to like." And the knowing passenger, and the ignorant passenger, who has not the vaguest idea that the Temple does not lie in the direction of an omnibus steadily proceeding to Kilburn, or Brompton, and yet never thinks of asking the question till nearly at her journey's end. And the talkative passenger, and the gloomy and sternly silent passenger, who seems to consider a remark

as a personal affront ; and the passenger who never can find her purse, and persists in standing on the steps searching for it, and wildly clutching at the air when the 'bus moves on, and is only saved by a special Providence, or—the conductor, from an ignominious contact with the muddy street, or the inviting pavement. These, and many other curious beings, are the types of the omnibus frequenters ; and I, being by nature and profession a student of human nature, had found them an endless source of interest and speculation, as I journeyed to or from the editor's "den," where I worked, and the modest lodging I inhabited. But never before had I seen any of that sex, whose idiosyncrasies specially delighted me, do such a thing as my opposite neighbour had done, namely, tie a knot in her handkerchief.

I looked at her. I looked at the knot as she replaced the whisp of filmy cambric in her dainty little muff ; for, despite sunshine and soft winds and daffodils, no wise or sensible person, who had lived for any length of time in England, would have dreamt of believing the promise of that spring day.

I didn't believe it, though I had left my overcoat at home. But then it was shabby, and the sunshine was very bright. I had also corrected my imprudence by taking an umbrella with me. It was a very smart umbrella, and I am not betraying confidence when I say it was not mine, but the property of a friend to whom I was going to return it on my way home, provided it did not rain. Well, as I have already said, I looked at the knot and at the maker of the knot, and puzzled as to why and wherefore she had made it, and found that the progress of speculation acquainted me with various facts which perhaps had very little to do with that knot, but which still were—interesting.

For instance there were her eyes—brown, soft, velvety—full of unknown possibilities. Eyes which looked as if dreams of the "to be" had filled with the mists of their own fancies those sweet, soft depths. And her hair, brown also, but catching glints of sunshine in its meshes, and framing in the white, smooth brow, and faintly tinted cheek, with just the needful tone of colour they required. And her lips, charming in repose, arched and pouting, and with faint suggestions of dimples on either side, and which one felt sure would look equally charming if parted in speech or laughter.

But of course all this had nothing to do with my interest in the girl herself. No ; as I said before, and as I distinctly

repeat again, it was simply and entirely that knot in the handkerchief.

There were not many people in the omnibus that morning; and one by one they dropped, or jumped, or stumbled, out, until at last only she and I were left. She and I—and the knot.

Oh, how I longed to ask its meaning! How I wished that I had been born without curiosity! How I wondered whether audacity or accident would befriend me so far as to put some question or remark into a deferential form of address, and thereby lead up gently to the subject on which I was speculating!

I grew hot and cold with dread and suspense. Every glance at the conductor seemed to convey the ominous command, "stop." Every movement of the daintily gloved hand threatened the production of a purse and the threepence. Hers at present was a threepenny fare—I had calculated that. So was mine. I thought what a sweet and mysterious sympathy must have brought us to share the same conveyance and the same fare. I also thought how well yellow daffodils looked against brown plush, and that if Fate had been kind enough to grant me a sister, I should have chosen just such a type of maiden sweetness and purity, and—well—beauty, as was the knotter of that handkerchief. I thought—well, a great many things which I am not bound to confess; but most of all I thought of that knot, and why it had been made.

We were in the most crowded part of the Strand, and our equipage was dashing merrily along, when suddenly there came a fearful crash—a jerk that threw my fellow passenger into my arms, to the serious detriment of her hat, and the daffodils.

It was a not unusual catastrophe; the omnibus had come into collision with another omnibus, and the wheels seemed to have got hopelessly intermixed. There was much swearing and vociferating, and jerking of the unwieldy vehicle, and confusion of voices, and a brief dialogue with a policeman, and then we got off again.

But the accident had broken the ice; and my pretty companion and I exchanged a few words relative to the carelessness of omnibus-drivers before she got out.

For she did get out at Wellington Street, and I sighed as I watched the graceful figure disappear, and wondered if I should ever see it again. Strange to say, the accident had completely driven out of my head the knot in the

handkerchief. I, in turn, reached my destination, and stopped the "bus," and rose from my seat. As I moved to the door I saw something white lying just where my foot had been. I stooped and pick it up, and thrust it into the breast of my coat. It was her handkerchief—the handkerchief with the knot that had been troubling me so long. It must have fallen from her muff when the omnibus collision took place. I had not the vaguest idea what made me snatch it up as if it belonged to me. I suppose I ought to have given it to the conductor; but if that was a more honest proceeding than appropriating it myself, I agree with the Jew, who observed, of what the proverb terms "the best policy," that no doubt it might be the best, but he thanked Heaven he had always been able to do without it.

In this special instance I found myself quite able to "do without it;" and the little handkerchief, with its delicate suggestion of perfume, and its feminine puzzling knot, lay near my heart all day, and kept me in constant remembrance of the pretty owner.

Should I ever see her again? Would she miss the handkerchief? Would the loss of that mysterious knot in any way affect her actions? For little things become sometimes powerful levers of Fate.

I am afraid I thought of her a great deal, despite work and the bother and fuss of publishing day, for I was sub-editor on the staff of a popular journal, which modesty forbids me to name here. Literature was, indeed, my forte, or I imagined it so to be. I had published three novels, written sundry farces and plays, and done a great deal of miscellaneous work that served to pad magazines and society papers. I was a long way off making my fortune, though, and was seriously thinking of emigrating to that new El Dorado—the Cape—where gold mines and diamond fields seem to be as common as black-beetles in a lodging-house kitchen, when I met the fair owner of the handkerchief.

All that day my thoughts seemed obstinately bent on the desirability of attaining wealth; of having a house of one's own; of the joys of domesticity, as opposed to bachelorhood; of a fair face to smile welcome and greeting after the day's labours were ended; of—well, really I cannot write half of the wild thoughts and fancies that flitted through my brain.

I had never been in so strange and foolish a mode since my "calf days;" never felt my mind swaying to and fro so persistently over a field of romantic possibilities, conjured up by a fair face, a pair of soft eyes, the smile of sweet, serious lips. But again I repeated to myself that in this instance it was not the face, or the eyes, or the girl herself; it was only, and simply, and entirely that she had chosen to puzzle me into conjectures about that knot in her handkerchief.

Work was over at last, and I was free to leave office, and papers, and all the worries attendant on them behind, and to stroll home in the sweet, cool evening, in as leisurely a fashion as I wished. The spring day had kept its promise; the sky was clear above the dingy buildings and crowded thoroughfares; the air mild and sweet as the violets, and primroses, and daffodils, which everywhere brightened the street corners from flower-girls' baskets or market trucks.

Poets always speak of spring as if it was a joyous time, and to be taken joyously. Maybe that is possible when one is very young, or very happy. I only know that to me the voice of spring is full of yearning and regret, of sad and tender memories that made my vanished youth bright and hopeful as itself—but, unlike itself, fulfilled no single promise.

Perhaps never had I felt that yearning, and sadness, and regret, so strongly as on this morning of which I write, nor the longing for one other soul in sympathy with mine; one other life to share with me its dreams and visions, its joys and sorrows; one strong, firm hand-clasp of friend or love on the shifting sands of time; and never before had I known the longing die out in a passion of wild regrets and futile rebellion, that to a woman would have meant tears, to me, alas! only the old, weary burden of endurance for endurance' sake.

CHAPTER II.

THE REASON OF THE KNOT.

I WAS almost at my own door, when suddenly my eyes fell on something in my hand—the umbrella! I had promised to return it that evening, and the sight of it recalled the promise, and induced me to turn my footsteps in the direction of Piccadilly, where lived its owner—the one individual among my numerous acquaintances who really stood to me in the light of that much-abused word "friend."

Launcelot Crampton and I had been college chums

together, and though fortune had favoured him, and deserted me, we had always kept up the intimacy and companionship begun in our youth. He was younger than myself, and possessed of independent means. However, that fact did not prevent him from utilizing talents of no mean order. His artistic tastes had led him to follow painting as a profession; and as success is sure to befriend the fortunate who do not actually need it, he had the satisfaction of becoming popular, and of being largely sought after as a portrait-painter, by reason of one picture which he had exhibited three seasons before that spring-time of which I write.

His rooms were in a street leading out of Piccadilly, with a studio at the top of the house. I was admitted, and found him in the studio, lazily stretched on a divan, and smoking Turkish cigarettes, while he contemplated a half-finished picture on the easel before him. He raised himself on one arm as I entered, and greeted me with his usual bright smile of welcome.

"Quite a stranger, old man," he said. "What have you been doing with yourself? You've not been here for a good three weeks."

I shook hands, and gravely deposited the borrowed umbrella on a chair.

"You see," I remarked, "I have not forgotten to bring back your property."

"Yes," he said, "I see. Banks told me you had borrowed it the other day. Why wouldn't you come in?"

"I heard you had a sitter. I didn't like to intrude."

"Ah, yes," he said, his face brightening into a smile of pleasure and satisfaction, "so I had. There's the portrait. What do you think of it?"

I turned and glanced at the easel. To say I started, is to say very little. There, facing me, was the sweet girl-face, the brown, velvety eyes, the hair half dusk, half gold, of my friend of the handkerchief.

"What is it? Do you know her?" asked Launcelot. "I dare say you do, though. Perhaps you've seen her act—May Dering, you know; she's in that piece at the V—Theatre. She's absolutely charming. That's going up to the Academy," he added. "But there's a good month's work in it yet."

I said nothing, only stood and gazed at the portrait—a half-length figure; the dress of dead white satin, a cloak of

faint sea-green velvet, lined with exquisitely-tinted silk of the palest coral, just falling from the graceful shoulders.

How lovely she was—how lovely! And now I knew her—an actress, and one already celebrated for her grace, and beauty, and talent. One of the few actresses who was a lady, and could play a lady on the stage as in a modern drawing-room, without affectation, without vulgarity, without that drawback to most modern acting—burlesque of the part played.

May Dering—of course I had seen her act, but at too great a distance to recognise the face that morning in the omnibus. But now how it all came back to me! A dim room; the pathos and tragedy of a girl's face; the tender, broken music of a voice that always went straight to the hearts of her audience.

"Well, are you ever going to speak," demanded Launcelot at last, "or has that portrait deprived you of your senses? I don't wonder at it, for I'm quite gone on her myself. She's every bit as charming as she looks, and that's saying a good deal."

"Yes," I said, abstractedly, and then turned away with sudden resolution. "It's very odd," I continued, "how small the world seems, and how one is always knocking up against people quite unexpectedly."

"*A propos* of what is that philosophical remark?" enquired Launcelot, knocking the ash off his cigarette, and stretching himself out in an attitude of lazy contemplation of his work.

"*A propos* of Miss Dering," I said; and straightway related the omnibus incident.

He listened with apparent interest.

"Well, it is singular," he said. "And so you've got the handkerchief? Would you like to return it to her in person? I'll give you the chance if you wish."

"I should not—object," I said, cautiously, and trying—I hope with success—to make my face express nothing at all, and express it well.

"Well," laughed the lazy youth, surveying me from a vantage point of comfort, "I can manage it, for I'm going to an affair to-night where she is to be, and I can take you, if you like."

If I like! If parched ground likes rain. If burning desert loves shade. If the drooping flowers like the showers of summer. If—well, no need to continue in this strain. I could make but one answer conscientiously, and, being conscientious, I, of course, made it. I agreed to

call for Launcelot at eleven o'clock, and proceed to the festive gathering where my divinity of the handkerchief was to appear; and after a little more desultory conversation, and a good deal of "chaff" on the part of Crampton, I left the studio, and took my way to my own modest "diggings."

I am not a social man, and I never particularly affect those entertainments called "At Homes," where the unfortunate male biped has to stand in corners or on a stairway for three or four mortal hours, catching occasional glimpses of a singer or reciter in the far distance—pinned in by arms and limbs of other suffering mortals—occasionally struggling for a tepid ice, or a glass of that mildly poisonous beverage yclept "claret-cup," until the clock "strikes the hour of retiring;" and, with a sigh of relief, and a smile of forced politeness, you murmur over the hand of the equally martyred hostess, "Thanks for such a pleasant evening."

No; I hated parties of all sorts. My chief dissipation was a Bohemian supper with some three or four kindred souls, or a visit to the theatre. Yet now I was making one of a crowd, and a considerable crowd, too, among a set of people I did not know in the least, and certainly did not care a pin about—and for what? Only that I might restore a piece of property which I could perfectly well have left at Crampton's studio for its owner. Only that I might again look into the depths of those velvety brown orbs which, for the space of one spring day, had haunted me.

Well, I dare say men have ere this gone to parties and entertainments for reasons quite as ridiculous.

We had our names shouted up the staircase, and I bowed to a stout, matronly person in ruby velvet and diamonds, who I believe was the hostess, but whose name I don't know to this day. Needless to say I had not come to see *her*.

Launcelot and I succeeded after a time in getting into the reception-rooms, which were very full, and where music was going on as an aid to conversation.

My friend seemed to know every one; but I felt rather "out of it," to use a slang but expressive term. I glanced about with idle curiosity. I listened to scraps and ends of conversation with that vague indifference born of boredom, which represents a great deal of modern enjoyment—that is to say, if we may believe the tales in the smoking-room.

I saw many pretty women, many lovely toilettes, many interesting and celebrated persons elbowing their way

through the well-bred crowd, exchanging greetings, breaking up into groups, and generally behaving according to the edicts of society. But I saw not the one fair face I wished to see, and was just anathematising my folly in coming to such a gathering, when Launcelot's voice at my elbow broke cheerfully on the gloomy meditations caused by his desertion.

On his arm was my charming acquaintance of the morning, looking far lovelier even than my dreams of her, far lovelier, so I thought, than the portrait on the easel—far lovelier because of the flush and smile of recognition that seemed to break like sunlight over her face as Launcelot introduced me by name.

She held out her hand with the frankest, sweetest grace.

"You are not—quite—a stranger," she said, and the deep, sweet tones of her voice sounded to me as no strains of music, however beautiful, could have sounded.

I am usually accounted a very self-possessed man; but I don't know where my self-possession fled. If I looked as great a fool as I felt, I can afford to be sorry for myself as I felt the touch of that small, gloved hand, and looked back into the sweet and haunting eyes.

I stammered out a question as to the effects of the omnibus accident, and then, somehow, Launcelot drifted away, and my courage returned, and I managed to find her a seat and to plunge desperately into some sort of conversation in the hope of keeping her for a few moments to myself.

That handkerchief, that thrice-blessed handkerchief, came on the scene. I felt reluctant enough to part with it; but what could I do? Yet, as I gave it back, and saw the soft smile on her lips, a sort of desperate courage induced me to ask the question that had tormented my curious mind in the omnibus.

"I suppose," I said, boldly, "you will think me very impertinent if I tell you that I have been puzzling my brains all day to fathom the meaning of this—knot? When you made it this morning I was vainly endeavouring to conjecture a reason. I have seen handkerchiefs put to many uses, but I never saw one knotted like this before."

"Oh," she said, with a little soft laugh, as she took the cambric from my hand, "that is easily explained. Have you really never seen any one—any woman, of course—tie a knot in her handkerchief?"

"Never!" I affirmed stoutly. "Is it—usual?"

"I think so," she said, demurely. "It is done as a reminder. At least, so I have heard. You want to remember some special thing, and when you take out your handkerchief and see the knot, you think of it at once."

"How very ingenious!" I said. "Now, that would never have occurred to a mere man. He would either trust to memory or—a pocket-book. So that knot was to remind you of—something. Something you were afraid of forgetting?"

"Being an author," she said, "I suppose you are privileged to express curiosity, and try to satisfy it. But it is an odd coincidence that this little knot, which has so puzzled you, has something to do with—yourself."

"With me?" I echoed, vaguely. "That sounds impossibly flattering."

"I do not mean it to be so," she said, gravely; "but it really is a little odd. I had this morning to see about some stage requisites, and I thought, as I was in the Strand, I would get that book of yours—'The Story of a Life.' I had had it from the library; but I and my mother liked it so much that I thought I would buy it, as I was in the Strand this morning. The memory flashed into my mind as I sat in the omnibus, and, for fear of forgetting, as I had so many commissions, I made that knot. Was I not right when I said that it was a little—odd?"

"I—I suppose so," I said stupidly. My thoughts were in a whirl—brown plush, daffodils, knots, collisions, all seemed mixed and mingled in a string of thronging memories. "It seems too good to believe."

"Why? There is nothing so very unnatural about the coincidence. Your books are popular, and deservedly so. I wish there were more of them, for my part—only three, and I have them all."

Was ever flattery so sweet? Was ever incense so potent? And yet I could only sit dumb and stupid there, and wonder if she really meant it; if she really cared for anything I had written, remembered any word I had said.

I looked at her, at the charming pose she had taken, at the sweet face, the pearly gleams of her satin gown. I had never felt so strangely and strongly attracted to any one before; and yet even as I acknowledged the attraction, the folly of it came home to me with that warning of common-sense we so often disregard.

"It is more than kind of you," I said, "to tell me so

flattering a truth. To know that even one among a crowd of readers appreciates him, is an author's best payment."

"You ought to be receiving plenty of such payment, then," she said. "I think your books are widely read and universally liked. You write a little too much above the head of ordinary folk to be exactly popular; but you surely call yourself successful?"

"No," I said, gloomily, "I do not; and I certainly can't make money."

"Oh, money!" she said, with a pretty pout of the charming lips. "Don't say you write for that, or are sordid, or mercenary. It spoils all imagination, inspiration, romance."

"Maybe so," I said; "but it is absolutely necessary. I have failed to impress upon my tailor or my bootmaker that imagination and romance should be fostered by long credit, and never roughly disturbed by demands for the settlement of that obnoxious document 'a little account.'"

She laughed.

"I suppose," she said, "that is true enough. How tiresome it is to want money, and to feel that for the mere want of it so much that is good and artistic has literally to go to the wall!"

"You," I said, gravely, "have never felt that need, I am sure. I hope you never will."

Our eyes met. I saw her face had grown sad and shadowed. In that glance, brief as it was, I seemed as if I had dreamt whole years away; yet only awoke, as a dreamer awakes, to find that I had forgotten everything, save that the dream had been very sweet.

"How little people really know of one another!" she said.

"You mistake very much if you think I have never known trouble or poverty. It was that knowledge which drove me to the stage four years ago. It was that trouble——"

She broke off abruptly. Her face grew very pale; the bouquet of daffodils in her hand trembled.

"That—what?" I asked involuntarily.

As I followed her glance, I saw it rest for a moment on a man leaning against the door-post at some distance from where we were seated. A short, coarse, middle-aged man, with a fat, white face and thick lips, and scanty fair hair. I did not know him; but I fancied my companion did, for the glance spoke recognition as well as dislike.

"I—I hardly know what I was going to say," she said, and her voice sounded to me tired and languid now. "Per-

haps that poverty has made women commit greater crimes than men ; has often, so sadly often, wrecked and spoilt the promise of womanhood with the cruelty of a relentless fate."

"Strange words," I said, involuntarily, "for such young lips."

"Oh," she said, passionately, "I am not young ; I am not ignorant. Do not think that. Life has been always hard to me. I don't know whether it may not prove even harder—soon."

Again her eyes strayed to that coarse uninteresting figure, and I could not restrain the impulse that bade me ask his name.

"Don't you know him?" she said. "That is Lord Vereker. He is one of the greatest patrons of the modern drama. No first night is complete without his presence ; no piece successful till it has received the seal of his approval."

"Is he a friend of yours?" I asked, jealously.

She looked at me ; then half rose from her seat.

"Take me down to the tea-room," she said, "and I will tell you. At present it is only necessary to say that it is at Lord Vereker's request your friend is painting my portrait, and that he—is to pay for it."

CHAPTER III.

THE REGION OF—PROBABILITY.

"Now tell me," she said, when I had found her a seat in the tea-room and procured her what she desired, "about your books—about yourself. I have so often longed to meet you, and wondered what you were like, and——"

"A mistake," I said, as she paused. "All artists and authors ought to be known only through their works. They never—or at least very rarely—come up to the expectations formed by those works."

"Perhaps so," she said, sipping the tea and looking dreamily and speculatively at me from over the little cup.

"But, all the same, one likes to have a flesh-and-blood acquaintance with them. Do you—I hope you won't think me inquisitive, but, remember, you are the first real author I have ever met—do you think when people write, they put themselves into their work? Perhaps I don't express it very clearly; but I have so often longed to know when anything has touched me, or—or come home to me as true, if the writer had felt it also? If it was experience, or sympathy, that made him say just the one thing that echoed my own

feelings—brought the tears to my own eyes that surely must have been very near his own ? ”

“ I understand what you mean,” I said, “ I can, of course, only answer from my own personal experience. I could not describe a situation if I did not also feel myself—temporarily—in that situation—suffering the pain, or suspense, or joy, or fear described.”

“ Ah,” she said, eagerly, “ That is just what I feel when acting. I am not myself. I am only the part I am playing. I forget everything—everything but that. I think,” she added, rather mournfully, “ that is the only time I am really happy.”

“ You like your profession, of course ? ” I said, as I took the cup from her hand, and put it on the table beside us.

“ Yes, dearly. Otherwise I could not follow it. I always think of a sentence I read somewhere, not very long ago : ‘ None can give more than is in them.’ I think it is so true.”

“ Yes,” I said, gravely, “ it is. But I fancy plenty of people pretend to a great deal more than is ‘ in ’ them.”

“ Do you go much into society ? ” she asked, suddenly. “ I have never met you anywhere before.”

“ I dare say not,” I said, grimly. “ I am not a social person at all, and go out very little. I only came here to-night——”

“ Yes,” she said, as I broke off abruptly.

“ To return your handkerchief.”

She looked at me ; her face seemed to have lost its brightness, and colour, and grown cold and worn.

“ You might,” she said, slowly, “ have given it to Mr. Crampton.”

“ Yes,” I agreed. “ It is one of the remarkable things of life to look back on what one ‘ might have done,’ and speculate on the results that would have followed.”

“ And you remembered me ; you thought about me ? ” she went on dreamily, as she pulled the petals of the daffodils with nervous fingers.

“ Yes ; I did both. Do you wonder at it ? ”

“ Very much. Because you seem so sensible—so—so different to most of the men I have met.”

“ Miss Dering,” I said, “ your flattery is very sweet ; but don’t you think it is also a little—dangerous.”

“ No,” she said, abruptly. “ We have not been conventional at all. When I said you were sensible, I meant it. Surely, for once in a way, one may speak truth without fear of being misjudged.”

"If it is truth," I said, "I am more than repaid for the pain you gave me a few moments ago. You were right when you said, we had not been conventional. Somehow, I feel as if I never could be—with you."

"But how," she asked, "Did I pain you?"

"You will think me a great fool," I said. "But did you mean anything—anything special—when you spoke of Lord Vereker?"

A slow hot flush crept up to the delicate throat and face; her eyes remaining cast down.

"If I said—yes."

For just a second or two my heart felt the quick sharp stab of an answered dread. Of course it must be that. He admired her; he wished to marry her. Could I blame him? Could I blame her? Had she not spoken of poverty, struggle, effort? She so fair, so young, so formed to charm, and attract, and delight! Why should she not accept the gifts of fortune when they were offered her? And yet when I looked at her fair young beauty and thought of him—that satyr with his pale, fat face, and sensual lips, and bloodshot eyes—a thrill of disgust ran through me.

Oh, why was I not rich? Why had I not gold mines and diamond mines, and—well, a few more of the good things of this world to throw at her feet? Why——

Her voice broke the spell of silence once more. "How absorbed you are! Of what are you thinking?"

I rose somewhat abruptly. "Miss Dering," I said, "I am not a lady's man, and not used to the ways of society, or, perhaps, I should succeed better in convincing you that I had no feelings of any sort whatever. As it is, I can only say that, if I interpret your words aright, and if, in your youth and beauty, you are about to sacrifice yourself as so many of your sex do, to a marriage that has only the advantage of wealth and position, I—I am too honest to offer congratulations. I can only say I am—sorry—for you."

She looked up. The colour had left her face again. Her eyes were dim, and shadowed by regrets that might—or might not—be real. Heaven forbid I should attempt to say.

"You cannot be more sorry for me," she said, in a low, stifled voice, "than I am for—myself."

I walked home that night under the clear, spring sky, railing against fate, against life, against the chance that had

led me that morning to interest myself in so simple and senseless a thing as a knot in a woman's handkerchief. To think that so small a thing should have power to alter the whole quiet tenor of a man's life !

Only that morning we had been strangers. That morning ; and now—should I ever see a spring day dawn, or catch the colour of daffodils, without a vision of a fair girl's face, and two eyes, brown, sad, soft as velvet, looking back to me, and seeming in silent eloquence to echo what the lips murmured with so pathetic a hopelessness ?

" You cannot be more sorry for me than I am for myself."

It was all so strange, so foolish, so inexplicable ; but, nevertheless, it was all as true as the pain at my heart, and the ceaseless memory that haunted me. She would marry Lord Vereker for his money. She would leave the stage. She would never again seem to me the vision of pure and innocent maidenhood, with the light and glory of the spring-time in her dreaming eyes, that I had idealised into a living poem.

It was all over—a brief dream, a passing fancy—and I had it out with myself under the quiet stars as I paced to and fro the Embankment, instead of going home to bed in a rational and becoming manner. Whatever there had been of romance, and poetry, and passion in my calm and undemonstrative nature she had brought to life, as suddenly, as strangely as the spring buds open at the first warm touch of sunlight.

It was useless to say that I knew nothing of her ; that she might be capricious, mercenary, illogical, vain ; that even if she had been free, nothing could have come of our acquaintance ! Quite, quite useless. If sensible ideas could root out the illogical senselessness of a man's or woman's love-dream, how different life would be !

There was nothing for it but to fight the battle out with myself, and then bow to the inevitable. I should not be likely to see her again ; and, after all, was there not always the world before me ? What was to prevent me seeking change, excitement, fortune, where and when I pleased ?

Before I went home in the chill freshness of the dawn, even as I lingered to gaze on the tints of the daffodil sky, my mind was made up. I would leave England, as I had so long talked of doing ; new scenes, new life, hazard and enterprise would soon knock sorrow and dreams out of my head. Life for me henceforth should be less imaginative,

and become a thing of prose and facts, and hard work, and labour. I would tell no one, not even Launcelot. But, all the same, I resolved that ere a week had passed over my head, I should have shaken the dust of my native land from off my feet, and set sail for the new El Dorado, about which men were going mad from day to day!

If I were writing a fairy-tale, how easy it would be to describe the beneficent efforts of the genius of good fortune on my behalf; for I suppose it will seem rather like a fairy-tale to say that at the venerable age of thirty-five, and in less than twelve months' time from the date of my leaving England, I was returning there with a fortune such as my wildest dreams had never pictured as a possible possession, achieved by my own personal efforts, and won by an extraordinary run of luck.

Having won it, the craving to return to the old land became too strong to be resisted. I had received or sought no news of any one there since I had left it; but now, as the murky skies and murky seas heralded its rear approach, a strange feeling of longing and regret came over me.

I thought of the old life; the drudgery of the editor's office; the Bohemian suppers; the discussions of work, and abuse of critics; the daily task of cudgelling one's brains for something that might at least appear novel; of Launcelot Crampton and his artistic tastes; of—of many things that most assuredly had nothing at all to do with one persistent, irritating little memory that would try and intrude itself, and was simply and entirely nothing more sensible or important than—a knot in a handkerchief.

"She is married long ago, of course," I said to myself, with a natural suggestion of a more irrevocable knot, tied, no doubt, by Bishops or Deans, or some such high dignitaries, long ere this.

Married long ago. Was that my sigh, or the faint breath of the air on my cheek? Strange that I had not yet forgotten; strange that twelve hard, toilsome months had not been able to wipe out the record of one brief spring day!

I was in London once more, gazing at familiar streets with that odd sense of unfamiliarity produced by absence and travel. In London, in the most luxurious of hotels, and enjoying the most luxuriously simple of repasts; in London, with the dear, friendly face of the *Times* before

my own, and the columns of foreign, and home, and social, and political news inviting my erratic attention.

Why did I, after all these months, turn suddenly to the theatrical column; and why, among all theatres and all pieces produced or revived, did there suddenly start out and confront me the name of one piece, and of one actress?

Answer me, scoffers at fate; for, indeed, I cannot answer for myself.

Neither can I give any clear or coherent account of rushing off to such a theatre and securing a front stall, and of sitting dazed and breathless, waiting for the envious curtain to rise and assure me I had not dreamt. That May Dering was May Dering still, not Lady Vereker, not martyred and sold for money or money's worth. Still my brown-eyed divinity, with the pure, sweet face and tender smile that, Heaven knows, had haunted my memory long, and long enough!

She saw me, and, little vain as I am, that momentary falter of voice, that flash of surprise and welcome in the brown eyes spoke eloquently enough to mine.

How long it seemed till the piece was over; how much longer till the public had wearied of calling and recalling her; how much longer before she appeared at the stage-door, with a grim and elderly maiden as chaperon, and, seeing me, told the cab that waited for her to follow slowly for a few yards, and gave me the blessed privilege of walking thus beside her, and learning she was still free.

And then I begged permission to call on the morrow, and put her into the cab and held her small, soft hand for one exquisite moment. And as I took my own way back to the hotel, I knew I envied no man on the face of the whole wide earth, for my darling's brown eyes had spoken a truth too sweet to whisper in these pages—a truth I would have faced a hundred deaths to hear, but which I might live to ask for and listen to, ere the sweet spring-time had passed again into the sadness of the young year's yesterday.

THE END.

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